THE Nation.

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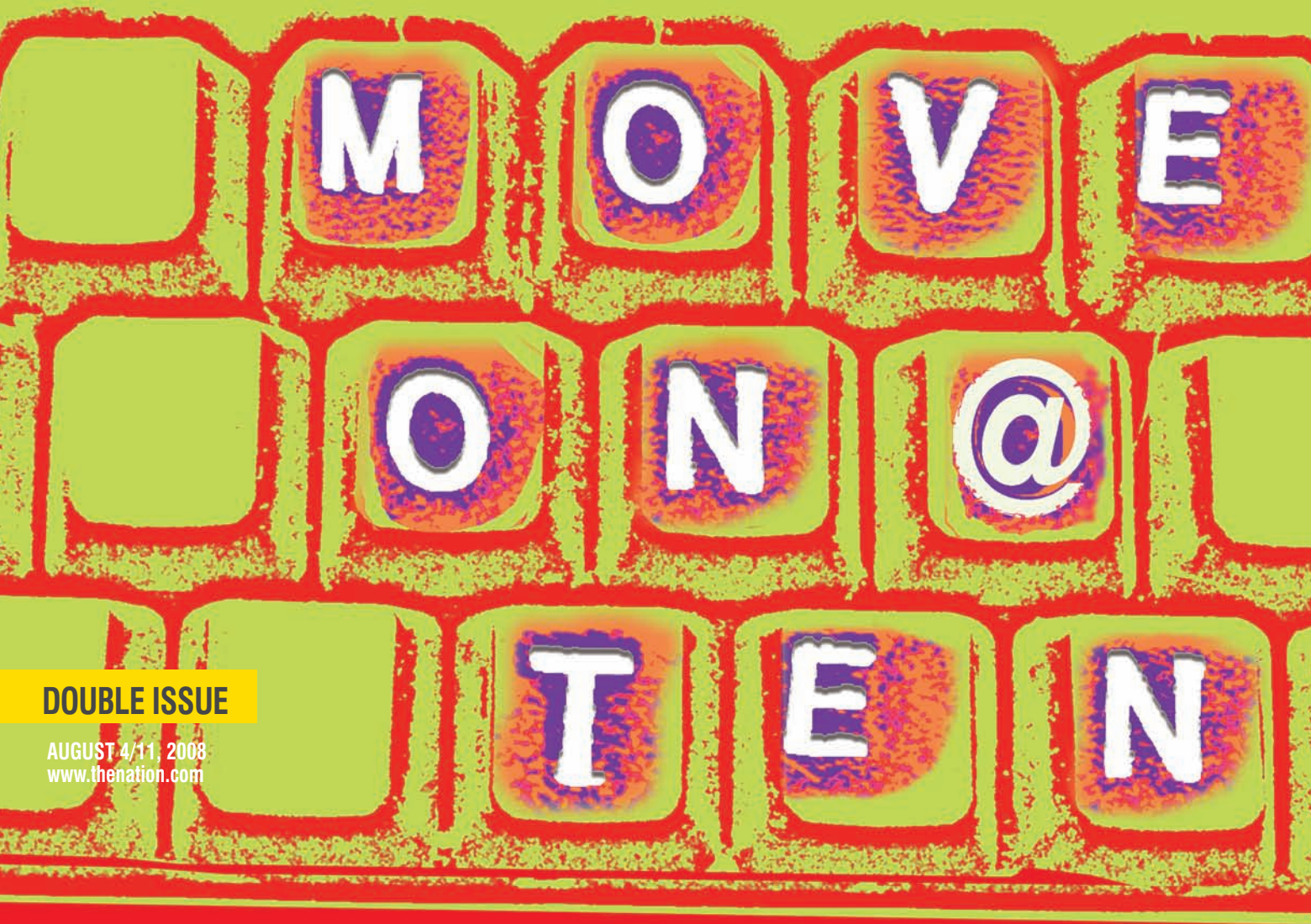

DOUBLE ISSUE

AUGUST 4/11, 2008
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Letters

Let's Hear It for Class Warfare!

Eliot, Me.

In your June 30 special issue, "The New Inequality," you showed a bar graph of the relative annual compensations of the top five "earners" in each of five groups (military leaders, Congress members, university presidents, CEOs and hedge-fund managers). The hedge-fund managers bar is more understandable and even more shocking if their $12,600,000,000 figure is measured (on the same scale) in these ways: if printed to its full height, it would travel up through eighteen and a half pages of *The Nation*, or would stand sixteen feet, eight and two-thirds inches or 5.097 meters tall. I think that amounts to the biggest bank robbery in history.

John J. Murphy

Nashville

The Nation appears only to hope for curbing capitalism's excesses. We will win battles and lose the war as long as we believe that reform of this economic system is possible. Capitalism's concessions to women, blacks and workers came at a time when America was in its ascendancy. But it took a depression, war and a US-dominated world economy to squeeze those compromises from the ruling class. Now we are in a wholly different period. The Soviet Union is gone, leaving capitalism in control. China and India are creating competition like we have never seen. The wealthy are loath to give one inch, much less go back to a time when there was a gesture at economic equality. Fighting for reform is absolutely necessary. But it must lead to the socialization of wealth and production for human needs.

Warren Duzak and Edward Morris
The Harpeth Institute for Social Policy

Reform and Resilience

Alexandria, Va.

Ari Berman's "John McCain's Voodoo Reformism" [July 14] unfairly attacks a reputable think tank using a rehash of discredited accusations and erroneous conclusions. The Reform Institute is a nonpartisan, nonprofit public policy organization that advances a bipartisan, solutions-based agenda to restore Americans' faith in government. The institute is not, as Berman suggests, affiliated with John McCain's presidential campaign.

The institute enjoyed the support of Senator McCain as it played a key role in advocating for landmark campaign finance reform legislation in 2002. With then–Senator Bob Kerrey, he was honorary co-chair of the institute's advisory committee.

The modestly funded institute receives contributions from individuals, foundations and corporations. Its diversity of funding reflects the institute's ability to attract support from across the political spectrum. It goes beyond what is required of a 501(c)(3) by disclosing donors on its website.

Berman's suggestion that the institute focuses on resilience to protect industry from regulation is without foundation. Resilience is a bipartisan concept that has already been embraced by the House Homeland Security Committee, which held hearings on it in May. Resilience will make America more secure by partnering the general public, the private sector and government in enhancing America's ability to respond rapidly to and recover from catastrophic events. The need for resilience was demonstrated by the lapses in preparedness and response exposed by the attacks of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina.

Paul Bateman, *chairman*
Board of Directors, The Reform Institute

Alexandria, Va.

Ari Berman's article is a heavy-handed attack on an up-and-coming and highly respected think tank as well as on a concept—resilience—rapidly gaining ground as the only sensible, unifying notion in the murky field of homeland security. The Reform Institute, founded in 2001 as a bipartisan organization to champion issues related to campaign finance reform, has over the years spread its wings to address other urgent national issues, including immigration, homeland security and climate change. It has

(continued on page 24)

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Obama and Iraq

Barack Obama's July 3 statement that he would "continue to refine" his policy on Iraq based on a "thorough assessment" of conditions on the ground and more information from military commanders prompted howls of protest (and a few cheers) from across the political spectrum. Antiwar activists worried that he was softening his earlier commitment to end the Iraq War on a fixed timetable; Republicans accused him of flip-flopping. Meanwhile, a rising chorus of establishment voices applauded Obama's comment as a step toward a "reasonable position" based on an open-ended policy of "conditional engagement." Faced with such obsessive parsing of his remark—based on the premise that Obama had shifted course—the candidate was forced to the podium (and the *New York Times* op-ed page) to clarify.

EDITORIAL

"I have said throughout this campaign that this war was ill-conceived, that it was a strategic blunder and that it needs to come to an end," Obama emphasized, while reiterating his support for a sixteen-month timeline for the withdrawal of combat troops, contingent on the US measure of security and stability in Iraq. "That position has not changed," he maintained.

Obama is right about the consistency of his position, and for progressives, therein lies both the promise and the limitations of what an Obama presidency might mean for the Iraq occupation.

In 2002, as the majority of Democrats in the Senate voted to authorize the Iraq War, Obama, then an Illinois state senator, warned against "a US occupation of undetermined length, at undetermined cost, with undetermined consequences." He correctly diagnosed the enormous toll the war would have on America's ability to address problems at home and abroad, and he later became one of the first national leaders to call for a phased withdrawal of troops. More than any other stance, it was this clear-headed rejection of the muddled calculations of the inside-the-Beltway crowd that set Obama apart from his major rivals for the Democratic nomination. More than any other candidate, he seemed to speak for the majority of Americans who opposed the futile sacrifice of American and Iraqi lives for no other reason than to avoid the perception of US surrender. So when candidate Obama pledges to give the military a new mission—to end the war—on his first day in office, is a commitment to change backed by a credible and courageous record as a critic of the war.

That said, Obama's Iraq plan has always left the door open for what could become an "occupation of undetermined length" under a Democratic President. Even as he rejects permanent US military bases in Iraq, Obama has said that no timetable should be "overly rigid." He has indicated that he would "work with our military commanders" to determine a withdrawal plan. He has supported the presence of residual troops, which could number as many as 80,000, to guard a militarized embassy, combat terrorism and provide training and assistance to the Iraqi government.

These positions, which he echoed in his Iraq speech on July 15, are not new, but they do raise the concern that Obama's pledge to end the war on a timetable could become subordinated to a shifting landscape of worst-case scenarios that impose new and unachievable conditions for withdrawal. Moreover, it is troubling that his plan does not ban the use of private military contractors. And his call for a strategic redeployment of US troops to Afghanistan and Pakistan, escalating the US military presence there—instead of emphasizing the need to redirect our foreign policy

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VOLUME 287, NUMBER 4, AUGUST 4/11, 2008
PRINTED JULY 16

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SUBMISSIONS: Queries only, no manuscripts. Go to www.thenation.com and click on "about," then "submissions" for a query form. Queries may be mailed to The Nation, 33 Irving Place, New York, NY 10003. SASE for poems.

INTERNET: Selections from the current issue become available Thursday night at www.thenation.com.

Printed on 100% recycled 40% post-consumer acid- and chlorine-free paper, in the USA.

This week at thenation.com

NEWS & ANALYSIS
Katrina vanden Heuvel: *New Yorker* cover flap
Tom Hayden: Obama, Iraq and Afghanistan
William Greider: The great deflation
Nicholas von Hoffman: Portrait of a panic

VIDEO NATION
Kai Wright on subprime swindles

NATION POLL
Solving the gas price problem

SIGN OUR PETITION
Limit media consolidation

away from occupying Muslim lands and toward resolute diplomacy to deal with threats and crises—raises serious questions about the foreign policy path he would pursue as president.

Still, it is clear that electing Obama is essential to ending the war in Iraq. But his victory is not sufficient to guarantee an end to the Iraq occupation on terms that are swift, just and complete. The challenge for those committed to that goal is to deploy a multipronged strategy that gets Obama into the White House and then holds him accountable for his promises as the antiwar candidate who spoke out so forcefully against open-ended occupation.

The immediate objective ought to be to ensure that Obama and the new Congress enter 2009 with an unequivocal and urgent mandate to end the war. For that to happen the election must be seen as a national referendum on the war, which has already receded behind the economy and gas prices as a key voter concern—while polls are showing that the electorate is split down the middle on a timeline for withdrawal. One way to refocus voter attention on the Iraq disaster is to emphasize how spending $120 billion a year on the war will make economic recovery and energy independence impossible. The Democratic platform process also offers an occasion to raise an unambiguous call to end the Iraq War (this plank has been proposed by fifty superdelegates and the Win Without War coalition). Obama's campaign has invited voters to participate in platform meetings in their communities, which could be another vehicle for such a program. As the aftermath of the 2006 midterm election demonstrated—when Congressional Democrats rode a wave of voter anger at the war but then did far too little to reverse it—voter discontent with the war does not necessarily lead to political action. For that, there must be a clear plan and real accountability for implementing it; the Congressional candidates who produced *A Responsible Plan to End the War in Iraq*, and have vowed to stick by it, recognize this.

Outside the arena of electoral politics, antiwar progressives must continue to develop their own movement against the war, their own analysis of its failures and their own proposals. A new report, *Quickly, Carefully, and Generously: The Necessary Steps for a Responsible Withdrawal From Iraq*, is a powerful answer to those who caricature withdrawal as "cut and run" (see Chris Toensing, "Exiting Iraq Is Easier Than They Say," at thenation.com). Without such analysis, we risk ceding the terms of withdrawal to the national security "experts" who were wrong about the war but are still committed to proving it a "success."

This magazine has called for complete withdrawal of US forces and contractors from Iraq ("Why We Must Leave Iraq," September 24, 2007), for regional diplomacy to stabilize the area and a recognition of our country's obligation to compensate the Iraqi people and provide resources to address the humanitarian crises—including the plight of nearly 5 million refugees—that the US occupation initiated or exacerbated.

Obama's plan for an exit from Iraq falls short of this standard. But in calling for an end to the occupation and by holding firm to a timetable for withdrawal, it offers a fundamental paradigm shift from plans put forth by the Administration and Congress—and John McCain.

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Noted.

ON WINGS OF SONG: "A good playwright loads the dice," **Thomas Disch** wrote in these pages, "to make [the collision of worldviews] compelling. A better playwright, like a god, unloads the dice, and devil take the hindmost." For Tom, who deserved to have been a character of the best of all playwrights but was not so lucky, the unloaded dice fell in his New York apartment on July 4, when his spirit could no longer bear to collide with mounting misfortunes, the most recent of which was an eviction notice. Tom committed suicide at 68. He is survived by a large, varied and brilliant body of writings and by many sorrowing colleagues and readers at *The Nation*.

Tom reviewed novels and poetry books for *The Nation*, contributed his own poetry, anatomized politico-cultural follies and issued polemics; but he will be most remembered at this magazine as its supremely amused and amusing theater critic. From 1987 to 1993, he joyfully saw all the shows he wanted for free and in return for small sums shared his thoughts, which had a wit, depth, verve and range no one could surpass. He wrote about the new **August Wilson** drama and about the latest edition of *Ice Capades*. ("No other dance form commands such broad realms of space or moves through that space with such dreamlike seeming ease.") He interpreted how *Hamlet* had again been reinterpreted, assayed the ratio of gold to dross in a **Tadeusz Kantor** international co-production (boy, did Kantor's fans get mad!) and famously described, in vivid detail, an epoch-making *Titus Andronicus* that **Charles Ludlam** had directed—only he hadn't, because Ludlam died too soon, of AIDS.

Like the speculative fiction that brought Tom his first acclaim—remarkable novels such as *Camp Concentration* and *On Wings of Song*—that review of the phantom Ludlam production showed how delight and sorrow, intellectual power and moral outrage were always at the core of his flights of imagination. In noting these qualities, at least one eulogist has compared Tom to that other ingenious novelist, poet and pamphleteer, **Jonathan Swift**. It's a just comparison. Let it be said of Tom Disch, too: "He has gone where fierce indignation can lacerate his heart no more." STUART KLAWANS

PUT DOWN NO FLAGS: Fawning memorials followed the July 4 death of former North Carolina Senator **Jesse Helms**. The grossest, no doubt, was Senator **Elizabeth Dole**'s proposal to name an AIDS bill after the noted homophobe, who once said that people with AIDS got sick as a result of "deliberate, disgusting, revolting conduct." But North Carolina state employee **William Eason III** would have none of it. The 51-year-old manager of the State Standards Laboratory refused to lower the flags outside the lab; in doing so, he flouted a gubernatorial directive and was forced to resign.

Catching up with Eason at his home in Cary, it was clear his irreverence had not wavered. "The man was a horrendous monster. North Carolina should be very ashamed of what he did to both us and the nation. He voted against every civil rights bill that came before him. He filibustered the Martin Luther King holiday. He had the audacity to say he wasn't a racist, and then he starts singing 'Dixie' when he was on an elevator with a black Congresswoman." Eason took a breath, then added, "If I can convert a person or two to believe in civil rights and humanity, I'll know I have done a good thing"—which would be the sweetest final comeuppance for the bigot from North Carolina. SARAH O'LEARY

FISA FIGHT-BACK: Many supporters of **Barack Obama** were outraged by his decision to back the recent White House surveillance bill (FISA), so they took over his website. To its credit, the Obama campaign runs the most open online platform of any major presidential candidate. Visitors may post criticism of the candidate—an act that was restricted on HillaryClinton.com—or use networking tools to build protest groups. Activists did just that by creating Please Vote NO on Telecom Immunity—Get FISA Right, which swiftly became the largest network on Obama's site, topping even the campaign's official groups. After whipping up the blogosphere, the group drew coverage from TheNation.com, newspapers and TV.

Then Obama responded directly. In an unusually long online letter, Obama said he still opposed immunity but supported the bill to modernize surveillance oversight and pursue "accountability" via future investigations. Activists welcomed the reply but rejected the substance. Many are continuing the fight at a new hub, getfisaright.com, which organizes Obama supporters around civil liberties. A related coalition, accountabilitynowpac.com, is coordinating a fundraising drive on August 8, the anniversary of the announcement of **Richard Nixon**'s resignation, to mobilize against the "key enablers of the tyrannical and lawless FISA 'compromise.'"

If Obama is lucky, he'll continue to benefit from activists who support his candidacy but also intend to press him on key issues, using his campaign's tools to organize for causes beyond his election. The protest group replied to Obama's letter by heralding this collective dynamic. "As you have said time and again Senator, 'we are the ones we have been waiting for,' and we are here, working to bring about real change in Washington." ARI MELBER

McKINNEY'S RUN: "Some people said this was the year to elect a woman president. Some people say this is the year to elect a person of color president. Some people say we need a president with experience serving on the Armed Services Committee, dealing with national security issues," observes former Georgia Congresswoman **Cynthia McKinney**. "I agree!" she adds, grinning. "I agree with all of them." McKinney, who clashed frequently with fellow Democrats during six terms in the House—and once with the Capitol Police—accepted the **Green Party** nod for president on July 12. Close to the Greens when she served in the House as an advocate of peace and impeachment, McKinney joined the party a year ago and was quickly touted as a presidential prospect. She came reluctantly to the fight but eventually won the nomination with relative ease. McKinney, who will run as an aggressive antiwar candidate, knows she'll struggle for a hearing in the fall but says, "I'm pretty good at making myself heard, even when people in power don't want to listen." JOHN NICHOLS

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The Shadow of His Smile

This Comment marks the debut of "Carnal Knowledge," a regular feature devoted to the subject of sex. Why sex? Like sports and art, sex elaborates, in its expressions and rituals, what it means to be human. Market culture understands this, which is why we have advertising and Paris Hilton. The right understands it, which is why we have porno crackdowns and anti–gay marriage initiatives. Even religious fundamentalists, with their advice columns on "How to Strip for Your Husband," recognize that there's more to life than sin, fear and elections; a little mind-blowing sex takes the edge off and is as good an argument for the existence of God as anything. Most acutely, gay liberationists and pro-sex feminists have long understood that sex, religion, economics, power and freedom aren't discrete little categories; they're of a piece. Accordingly, "Carnal Knowledge" will explore sex as desire, as work, as play, as the screen against which America projects its fantasies and fears. JoAnn Wypijewski, who has written widely for this and other publications about class, sex and politics on topics such as Madonna, the Clinton-Lewinsky affair, the Catholic priest scandal and torture at Abu Ghraib, will be our guide. The path she sets here will hardly be straight or narrow, but full of zigs and zags and surprises—like politics, like life. —*The Editors*

In politics as in pop, legions of little girls jumping out of their panties can't be wrong. That's the vital lesson so far of Election '08. I watched a throng of them in November 2006, teenagers in their short skirts and breathlessness, jumping and jittering, hands to cheeks, screaming for Barack Obama. White and black, they crowded to the front of a rally for Jim Webb in the onetime capital of the Confederacy, Richmond, Virginia. Jim who? One of the white girls awkwardly told me that she didn't really know anything about the beet-faced warrior for the white working class running for the Senate, and she wasn't really there to find out. Obama hadn't come there to say much about the candidate or Virginia or even that year's election, either. He glided across the stage like a crooner, one slender hand gracing the microphone, the other extending long fingers to trace the imagined horizon of his hopes and dreams. He must have talked for thirty minutes. It didn't matter what he said; he smiled a thousand watts, put a little Southern sugar in his voice and mentioned his mama. Webb steamed in the wings as the girls keened, and from somewhere in the crowd grown-ups started calling out, "Obama for President." He wasn't yet a candidate. He was Frank Sinatra, so cool he's hot, a centrifugal force commanding attention so ruthlessly that it appeared effortless, reducing everyone around him to a sidekick, and the girls in the front rows to jelly.

Those girls represented what they always have in America, a cultural longing. By '07 even the boys were Obama Girls, and their parents were borne along on the energy, feeling young and hip and a little damp in the drawers themselves. "America is back!" Obama told crowds he would announce to the world if they elected him. Hillary and the others didn't have a chance. They had welded themselves to prosaic needs and familiar lies. Obama recognized a different need, requiring a different lie, a pretty lie, not just "change" but "change you can believe in." *Tell me again. Yes, darling, you really are beautiful…* Like someone ground down by years in a bad relationship, America needed a seduction and, then, like the starlet on the crooner's arm, the reflected shine.

In an earlier era when America was losing a war and "All Systems Fail!" summed up a summer of multiple disasters, journalist Andrew Kopkind could look upon the smoldering cities, the black radicals, white dropouts, free-lovers and acid-trippers, and declare, "In lots of ways, America is swinging." It isn't swinging now. It's desperate and needy, outwardly brash but inwardly a mess and not sexy at all, like Tila Tequila, self-styled bisexual maverick, rejected on her own reality TV show by the contestant she chose for "a shot at love." In that long, hot summer of 1967 no one confused the whole culture with the white, tight, flailing power structure around LBJ; but today, with no major pole of countercultural revolt, it feels as if America itself is in the Uncool column with the tawdry crimes and embarrassing flubs of President Bush—"Airball!"

Enter Barack Obama, loosening up on the basketball court between campaign stops—"Swish."

If politically he now appears to be not substantively different from any other neoliberal, as a sex symbol he is the new man. New, most plainly, because in his mingled blood those born since 1980 or so can see their future lovers and children, if they don't already see themselves. For this generation, interracial sex is a normal experience, still complicated but nothing that 60 percent of them have not already entertained (polls use the word "dating"), nothing more risky than love. That Obama's parents are not alive as fleshy reminders that sex is part of a political and not just personal past means that the historically combustible idea of a black man and a white woman in bed together, and the larger reckoning with racism's long reach, can be avoided. And yet the past is newly potent in one sense. Suddenly, casually, it is hard to think of desegregation within the narrow limits set out by the schoolbooks, as a simple fight for a seat on a bus or in a public toilet rather than as a radical claim to express one's full humanity—through a kiss, a caress, a child, a life of one's own making, an unbroken line of free choices linking all those who

Calvin Trillin, Deadline Poet

Phil Gramm Says We're a Nation of Whiners

As senator, Phil was among the designers
Of laws that helped Enron, which showed no decliners,
Manipulate prices of oil from refiners.
(Its stock can be used in your cat box, for liners.)
His laws helped the mortgage thieves rook naïve
signers,
Who then lost their houses and can't afford diners.
So now he decides we're a nation of whiners.
Figures.

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have ever struggled for equality and sexual liberation.

There is something old about the new man, as well, though, or, rather, something of a romantic update on an old model. Not JFK. Obama resembles him only in his projected nonchalance. JFK's libido was like the Strategic Air Command, on permanent alert, meaning he'd spot a woman out the window, in a park, on a street and take her against the wall, while Jackie took to the White House trampoline. Barack and Michelle Obama channel some of the style of the current early-'60s revival—sleeveless sheaths and chunky pearls, *Ocean's 11* and *Mad Men*—without the alienation. America, they say, you can be cool and sexy again, "back!" and swinging, but secure this time. Those "excesses" of the '60s that Barack mentioned, those family fractures across the demographic board, they can all be resolved through hot married love.

When he leaned into Michelle as she wrapped her arms around him from behind after the New Hampshire loss, when she cradles his face in her expressive hands while kissing him, with every dap and nuzzle and palpable vibe between them, "you see love onstage," said Harriette Cole of *Ebony*, the first in a long line of popular magazines to certify the two as a "hot couple." The right will no doubt try again to paint Michelle as a bomb-thrower and might mine the vein of white fear of unbridled black sexuality that Barack prospected disturbingly close to when he scolded black fathers. But it's hard to see smears trumping the desire of millions of people for the promise of the most conservative thing in the world, a happy marriage. For youth the image of hot married love stokes the fantasy that maybe one day… For marrieds, it raises the notion that maybe this is the best sex they'll get. For Christians eager to sell the marriage bed as pleasure dome, it affirms that this is the best sex there is. Even homosexuals have a place inside the magic circle now that Obama has come out against California's anti–gay marriage proposition. All in all, a wholesome package as Barack and Michelle make America cool and marriage cool by making both sexy, or at least ready for their close-up.

It is still possible that voters will decide to hitch the national identity to the stiff, asexual, erratic McCain and his zombified former drug addict wife, instead. And if McCain were to choose the old bachelor and onetime merkin Charlie Crist of Florida as his running mate, there would at least be some *frisson* on the Republican side, as the governor's self-advertised old boyfriends marred the celebration of his hurry-up nuptials to a Halloween-costume heiress, and his old gay-hating religious-right allies had to choose whether to pull away or shout, "Hallelujah! He's been saved!" But right now, that all seems like too much reality for a nation hungry for a makeover.

JoANN WYPIJEWSKI

The Nation Sues the Government

On July 10 George W. Bush signed the FISA Amendments Act, which allows the government to spy on US citizens without meaningful judicial oversight and provides retroactive immunity to the Administration and the telecommunications companies that aided its warrantless wiretapping. A few hours after Bush's signing, *The Nation* joined the ACLU and several other organizations and attorneys in a lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of the act (see www.aclu.org). Why is *The Nation* joining the suit? This law will directly undermine the ability of the magazine's editors and contributors to gather information from foreign sources, many of whom will justifiably fear retribution if their communications cannot be kept confidential.

For 143 years, we have believed that an essential element of patriotism is the unyielding defense of civil liberties. Immediately after 9/11, as the mainstream media enlisted in the Administration's "war on terror," it became clear to us that the need for an independent and critical press was never more urgent. We are proud to join the ACLU and other plaintiffs in this lawsuit in the belief that the government's legitimate interest in protecting the nation can be fulfilled without sacrificing our civil liberties, and that surveillance activities should respect, not trample on, the Constitution.

Comix Nation

by STEPHFF

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Eric Alterman

I Read the News Today… Oh Boy

Spend some time on the "future of news" conference circuit, as I have recently, and believe me, you'll need a drink and perhaps a Prozac. The flight of readers and advertisers to the web has led to an unprecedented assault on stockholder value, making newspapers the investment equivalent of slow-motion seppuku. For instance, on July 11 Alan Mutter's invaluable Reflections of a Newsosaur blog reported that in "perhaps the worst single trading day ever" for the newspaper business, "the shares of seven publicly held newspaper companies today plunged to the[ir] lowest point in modern history." When these losses continued to accelerate, Mutter calculated that newspaper stocks had shed an amazing $3.9 billion in value in just the first ten trading days of July, leading to the disappearance of more than 35 percent of these companies' combined stock price in 2008 alone.

It's been nearly two and a half years since the much-missed Molly Ivins observed of media moguls that, "for some reason, they assume people will want to buy more newspapers if they have less news in them and are less useful." And yet the strategy continues unabated. The *Los Angeles Times* just announced that it will cut loose another 250 people, including 150 in the newsroom—this on top of a series of job cuts by the previous owners, which led to a revolving door of resigning editors and publishers who could not in good conscience carry out the cuts demanded of them.

As a result of this avalanche of industrywide layoffs, buyouts and firings, Mutter notes, the industry's age-old ratio of one journalist per thousand papers in circulation is about to disappear. But as a contributor to Romenesko pointed out, this is "a self-correcting mechanism. As subscribers find less and less to read because newspaper staffs are thinned too much to produce quality copy, subscriptions will lapse and the ratio will be restored—until, of course, additional layoffs refresh the cycle."

For those who embrace the now omnipresent mantra that the staff will simply have to "do more with less," blogger Kevin Roderick of LA Observed notes, "Yes you can put out a good paper with 700 staffers—but not a better paper than the one paying customers are already fleeing."

Corporate responses have also included: asking an already dispirited staff to take a 10 percent pay cut (the *Boston Globe*); raising the newsstand price by 33 to 50 percent (Gannett, the *Wall Street Journal*); drastically reducing the newspaper's news/advertising ratio (all Tribune papers); turning the paper's Sunday magazine over to the business staff (the *Los Angeles Times*); reducing the physical size of the newspaper and cutting down on the news hole (everyone); buying out experienced, knowledgeable staff members and replacing them with underpaid novices (everyone); and closing foreign and national bureaus (almost everyone). Virtually the only expense still intact is executive pay. On the Recovering Journalist blog, Mark Potts notes that the average compensation among the thirteen public-company newspaper CEOs was just under $6 million a year in 2007, according to corporate proxy filings with the SEC. These figures, one can only conclude, are entirely unrelated to performance.

The dearth of decent ideas designed to save newspapers—or reinvent them for the digital age in ways that preserve their crucial democratic functions—is curious and depressing. It's curious because some of the smartest, most ambitious and most civic-minded people in America are deeply engaged with the problem. It is depressing because the only ones with the self-confidence to undertake radical measures appear to be completely off their respective rockers.

Take the example of the Tribune Company's new owner, Sam Zell. Leaving aside his penchant for potty-mouth rejoinders for those who question his judgment, Zell has done nothing to slow the slide in the company's fortunes and much to accelerate it. Scrambling like mad for cash to service the company's debt, Zell sold off the profitable *Newsday* and borrowed $300 million against future earnings, a clear sign of panic. To advise him on long-term strategy, he has appointed as "chief innovation officer" Lee Abrams, a man who was apparently surprised to learn that reports datelined "Baghdad" are actually produced by reporters in Baghdad. His suggestion: "photos of the reporter with Iraqi kids" to advertise this fact.

Writing on his blog, Abrams mused that newspapers were "TOO NPR," (caps in original), which he found "a bit elitist." He would rather have newspapers "study the feel of a well honed All News Radio station," which he defines as "being INTELLIGENT… not intellectual."

The more one listens to the men and women at the top of the industry, the more it becomes obvious that the survival of the newspaper—the primary information-gathering and knowledge-disseminating instrument of American democracy—is going to have to come from somewhere else. Sure, the blogosphere makes some invaluable contributions and a few foundations are rising to the challenge of funding investigative journalism. Carnegie Corporation president Vartan Gregorian recently suggested to me that universities might attach a small fee to their students' tuition—like an activities fee—to pay for the newspaper subscription of their choice. This would improve the newspapers' bottom line, give their advertisers access to a coveted demographic and, if successful, would inculcate in the students the habit of newspaper reading as they approach maturity as voting citizens. It's a great idea, and unlike most of what one hears at these conferences, it is on scale with the problem. Unfortunately, young people do not appear to want to pick up a newspaper, even for free. They often leave them lying around, even at journalism schools, where they are distributed gratis.

I don't have a better idea, except to repeat, again, the following: the loss of daily newspapers is a significant threat to the future of our democracy. It is far too important to be left in the hands of a bunch of clueless media moguls and their "chief innovation officers." ■

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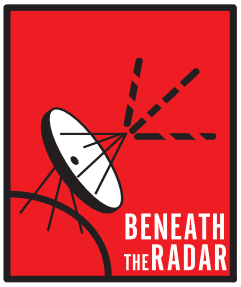
Gary Younge

Indiscreet Conversations

The iPhone has a new application—a GPS navigational system called Loopt. If you're out and about and you want to know if your friends are in the neighborhood, your phone can tell them where you are and theirs tells you where they are. You're in the loop. With technology like this, it's a wonder anyone has affairs anymore. Total information: constant contact, anytime, all the time. There's almost literally nowhere left to hide.

What is true in our personal lives is increasingly true in our political culture. Jesse Jackson was caught whispering sour nothings about Barack Obama to a fellow guest on Fox News. "Barack's been talking down to black people," Jackson said. "I wanna cut his nuts off."

He thought the mic was off. He should have known better. In 1984 in a conversation with *Washington Post* reporter Milton Coleman, Jackson referred to Jews as "Hymies" and New York as "Hymietown." "Let's talk black talk," he told Coleman, assuming that meant it would be off the record. When Coleman decided to publish it, Jackson at first denied it, then finally admitted it and apologized. This time there was no denial—there couldn't have been. With blogs, webcams, Facebook and YouTube, there is always a mic somewhere and it is always on.



There is, in short, no such thing as a discreet conversation anymore. The personal, the private, the privileged and the confidential no longer really exist. The stories you may choose not to share are not yours to keep; the conversations you hope will go no further can just keep traveling. A remark may be off the cuff or off the top of your head—but nowadays you must always assume it's on the record.

The fact that this discourages public figures from speaking their mind is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it deters open and honest intellectual engagement and development. People generally arrive at positions through discussion and debate and trial and error. But the days when they could think out loud are fast disappearing. A culture desperately in need of ideas is giving its political class no place to think. If you feel the mic is always on, you will always perform. Politicians have to forgo the right to be angry, exasperated, depressed or funny—or at least they reveal those emotions at great risk to their credibility. Their human qualities—the very thing we need more of—become a liability.

On the other hand, it can pry candor from the lips of the caged and the canny. It exposed Trent Lott's nostalgia for segregation and Republican George Allen's "macaca" moment that effectively derailed his Senate race in Virginia.

In Jackson's case, it gave furtive voice to his ambivalence toward Obama. Not, as some claim, because Obama has usurped his mantle as leader of Black America but because Jackson is a radical and Obama is not. They emerge from the same city but different traditions and moments, so there is no reason that they should necessarily agree or even get along. Having endorsed Obama early on, Jackson rarely spoke out for him. This seemed to work well for both of them. So it's not as though Jackson was caught saying something he didn't really believe or that represents a distortion of his position. Quite the opposite. He was caught saying something he did feel but had no intention of sharing. Put bluntly, his problem was that he got caught.

Jackson's ire had been provoked by a speech that Obama made on Father's Day in which he called on all fathers, particularly black fathers, to play a greater role in the lives of their families. Fathers "have abandoned their responsibilities, acting like boys instead of men. And the foundations of our families are weaker because of it," he told the congregation of the Apostolic Church of God, in Chicago. "You and I know how true this is in the African-American community. We know that more than half of all black children live in single-parent households, a number that has doubled—*doubled*—since we were children."

Obama was not saying something new or outlandish. Indeed, the theme of black masculine responsibility is as banal a conversation topic around the black dinner table as themes of Reverend Wright's sermons on US foreign policy. Obama wasn't saying anything that wasn't being echoed in thousands of black churches around the country on the very same day.

So why was Jackson so bent out of shape? His issue was less the text—Obama also spent some time talking about the government's role in assisting black families—than the context. Jackson understood how easily the speech could and would be misunderstood outside black churches in particular and the black community in general, in a culture that routinely pathologizes black men. In this prediction, at least, he was correct. Right-wing commentators could barely contain themselves with these new talking points, handed to them by a black presidential candidate.

But that doesn't make Obama wrong. Racism is a serious impediment to intelligent public conversation about problems in the black community. Not talking about those problems, though, does not make them go away. This is not a new challenge. "Our worst side has been so shamelessly emphasized that we are denying we have or ever had a worst side," W.E.B. Du Bois said at the turn of the last century. "In all sorts of ways, we are being hemmed in." But the conditions under which the challenge must be faced have changed dramatically. In a world where discreet conversations are no longer possible, the closed doors behind which embattled communities conducted internal debates have been thrown wide open by new technologies and new political realities. The days of "black talk" are over—at least for a viable presidential candidate who needs to appeal across racial lines. If we can just get enough white people to listen without prejudice, then what we lose in discretion we might gain in dialogue. ■

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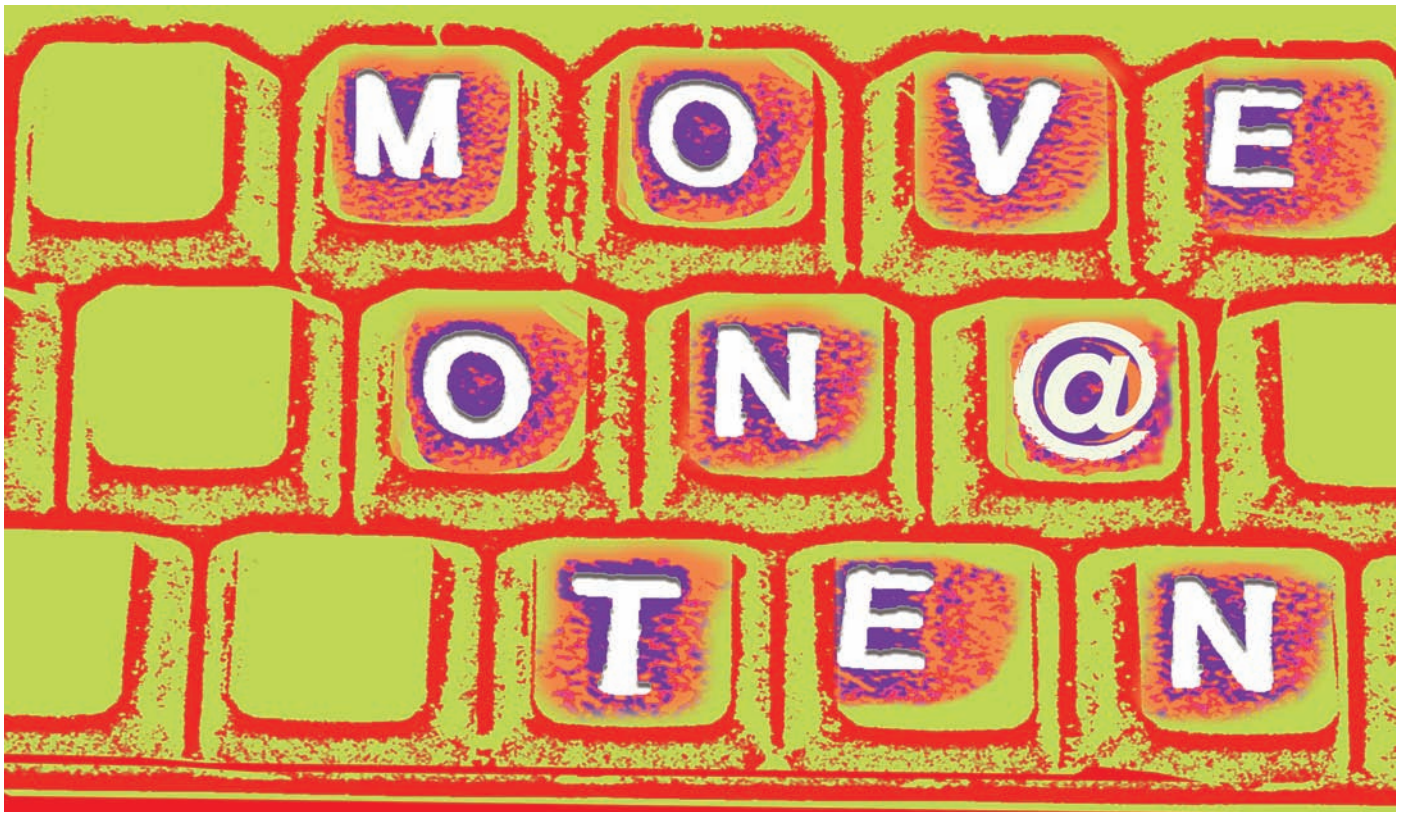

It has given voice to a new silent majority and made enemies on the left and right. Now what?

by CHRISTOPHER HAYES

Five years to the day after American forces began their campaign of "shock and awe" in Iraq, opponents of the war gathered in Washington. While some came with bullhorns and drums and flag-draped coffins, danced down K Street and confronted legislators on Capitol Hill, others formed a quiet vigil in Lafayette Park across from the White House. Here there were no bullhorns or drums. Instead, there were a few news cameras, a banner that read Invest in America, Not Endless War in Iraq and a clutch of several dozen members of MoveOn. Bill Hamm, a retired Air Force pilot from Texas who had come to Washington for the Take Back America conference, told me that during his military career, fellow pilots often gave him push back because of his liberal politics. But, he said, "I think that's changing now." Hamm told me that back in Austin, where he and his wife serve as regional coordinators for MoveOn's local councils, his wife was organizing a 150-person vigil outside the governor's mansion. Because of "war on terror" restrictions they were told they couldn't bring candles. "So they're going to use flashlights."

This year, MoveOn turns ten. News of the organization's advanced age tends to elicit the same startled response as word of a childhood star's divorce. But more important, the anniversary serves to highlight just how far the organization has come. What started as a simple one-sentence petition hastily posted to the web has evolved into the most readily identifiable group in the vanguard of a revived progressivism, with a membership that exceeds 3 million. Capable of dominating a news cycle with a single ad and raising millions of dollars with a lone e-mail, MoveOn pioneered an entire approach to conducting politics through the Internet that has been replicated and spun off across the country and around the globe, an approach that, as the Obama campaign has dramatically demonstrated, has permanently transformed the landscape of American politics. And yet the roots of its success remain largely misunderstood.

This is in large part because MoveOn has been viewed through the distorting lens of a four-decade culture-war narrative, one whose labels have long outlasted the movements and dynamics that gave rise to them. In 1968, as the country approached what seemed to many at the time something like a civil war, Richard Nixon addressed the Republican National Convention in Miami Beach. He described "cities enveloped in flame…sirens in the night…Americans hating each other, fighting each other, killing each other at home." Amid this tumult and chaos, Nixon presented himself as a tribune for those who weren't in the streets, who weren't seeking out confrontation and attention, "the forgotten Americans," he called them, "the non-shouters."

Forty years later, despite tectonic shifts in demographics and politics, our political map still bears the same key: a decent silent majority on one side besieged by a zealous, angry,

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out-of-touch left on the other. For movement conservatives and establishment centrists alike, MoveOn is just a new name for an old foe. Bill O'Reilly has called it "vicious," "radical," full of "fanatical left-wingers" who are blackmailing the Democratic Party. John McCain, not to be outdone, responded to the "General Betray Us" ad by telling a Republican audience this past fall that MoveOn "ought to be thrown out of this country." Ostensibly mainstream voices like CNN's Campbell Brown have referred to MoveOn as "American insurgents," while Peter Beinart, in a 2004 cover essay in *The New Republic*, suggested that MoveOn be purged from the center left just as communists once were. Democrats have gotten in on the act as well: Hillary Clinton told donors at a private fundraiser that MoveOn had "intimidated" her supporters in the caucus states, and Barack Obama took a veiled swipe at the group in his recent speech on patriotism.

But understanding MoveOn as the direct descendant of the '60s protesters gets the organization exactly wrong. MoveOn's success (and, indeed, its limitations) is powered by its appeal to today's non-shouters. Though its politics are in many ways the opposite of the Nixon silent majority's, they share a disposition. They are people not inclined to protest but whose rising unease with the direction of the country has led to a new political consciousness. For citizens angered, upset and disappointed with their government but unsure how to channel those sentiments, MoveOn provides simple, discrete actions: sign this petition, donate money to run this ad, show up at this vigil. "Before I joined MoveOn," says staffer Anna Galland, "I was organizing in Rhode Island doing faith-based antiwar activism. In March 2003, MoveOn had put out an action alert for a vigil against the Iraq War. There were 500 people on the steps of the Capitol, and I remember thinking, 'I know all the activists in the state; where did all these people come from?' I think many people have a MoveOn moment where they look around and realize that this organization has managed to tap into a much broader range of people than they might have seen at past activist events."

Take, for example, Sandy Tracy. For twenty-eight years Tracy taught high school in a small town seventy miles west of St. Paul. She always voted Democratic, but she was never particularly politically engaged. "I'm 60," she says, "and during the Vietnam protests I was too afraid to participate in any of those kinds of activities." But then came the Iraq War and Kerry's defeat, and it began to feel like the country, even the world, was spinning out of control. "I was really, really, seriously upset about the results of the election of 2004 and the track that the war was going. That was part of why I retired when I did: I just couldn't concentrate on my job."

Living in a conservative area, Tracy felt she was alone in her disaffection. But then in 2007 an e-mail arrived from MoveOn telling her that someone was organizing an antiwar rally near her. "I went, Oh my gosh, there's somebody fifteen miles from me!" Within a couple of weeks she was on a bus to Washington to join a massive protest on the Mall. "I'd never done anything like that before. Along the way I found other people in MoveOn groups, peace groups, related kinds of progressive activist groups, and they weren't telling me I should just mind my own business and not talk. And spiritually that was very uplifting to me. I just went, Aha, we're onto something here."

As Tracy's experience shows, the MoveOn model of simplified and accessible activism has proved enormously successful. But as the organization enters its second decade, there's evidence that it's reached a point of diminishing returns. In the run-up to the Iraq War, MoveOn's membership exploded, from 600,000 to 1.6 million, but its rate of growth has slowed considerably since then. What's more, the organization faces a challenge in navigating the emerging political landscape. Born in opposition, first to the Republican impeachment effort, later to the Iraq War and the Bush agenda, MoveOn may soon be forced to define its relationship to a government controlled by its supposed allies in the Democratic Party—at a time when the party's progressive base is increasingly frustrated about its failure to deliver the change it has promised.

Understanding MoveOn as the direct descendant of the '60s protesters gets the organization exactly wrong.

MoveOn founders Joan Blades and Wes Boyd are non-shouters to the core. Blades used to make her living as a divorce mediator, helping couples move from heated stand-offs to win/win, and met the mild-mannered Boyd in a soccer league. The two married and threw themselves into their new software company, which scored a massive hit in the 1990s with a package of whimsical screen savers that featured, improbably, flying toasters. "As for politics," says Blades, "I voted, and so did Wes," but that was about it. "We were very busy with our software company."

Then, in the late '90s, as they watched the impeachment spectacle from their comfortable home in Berkeley, California, the couple began to feel as if the country's leaders and the members of the media had collectively lost their minds. "We were business people," says Blades, "so we thought about the opportunity costs of our government being obsessed with the scandal when in theory they had real work to do." The technically savvy Boyd got the idea to put up a website with a petition form: people could fill in their name and contact information as a means of expressing their discontent with the entire impeachment circus. The petition read simply: "Congress must immediately Censure President Clinton and Move On to pressing issues facing the country."

They sent an e-mail to 100 friends with a link to moveon.org. A September 24, 1998, article in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Net's Role in Scandals May Alter News Media, mentioned the effort in its final paragraph, noting that the site had attracted 500 signatures in its first day of operation.

By the end of the week, that number was 100,000.

"Essentially we stepped into a vacuum of leadership, and we said something sensible," recalls Blades. "We're the quintessential accidental activists." They figured the petition would

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be a one-time endeavor, but when they saw the reaction they knew they were onto something. "I still remember one of our early e-mails: a woman wrote in and said, You know, I've never done anything political. I'm a single mom. I get home and feed my son. This"—meaning signing a petition, forwarding an e-mail—"is something I can do." This ease of use remains one of MoveOn's hallmarks, one with particular appeal at a time when Americans work more than their counterparts in almost every other industrialized nation.

It's worth pausing for a moment to note the complete lack of ideological zealotry in MoveOn's founding. "It was really more about common sense versus insanity than it was about progressives versus conservatives," says Ben Brandzel, who worked for MoveOn and now consults with other groups around the world using the same model. "Impeachment, the details of that, really has nothing to do with any political scientist's idea about progressive or conservative," he says.

It wasn't until the shock of 9/11 and the run-up to Iraq that MoveOn's "basic common sense populism [was] grafted onto a partisan divide," according to Brandzel. The vessel for this shift was an unassuming 6-foot-3 20-year-old named Eli Pariser. As MoveOn PAC's executive director, Pariser, now 27, is the organization's de facto leader, and his reserved bearing is rather stunning if you've spent any time listening to Bill O'Reilly. In a wedding announcement in the *New York Times* this summer his new wife described him as "clear-eyed and hopeful." In person, he's so preternaturally calm one almost feels he might be some kind of reincarnated lama.

Even as Bush's extremism has pushed MoveOn toward partisanship, its original pragmatic sensibility remains woven into its DNA.

The day after 9/11, Pariser, then living in Boston, wanted to do something to help. When the local blood bank told him it was beyond capacity, he channeled his anguish and hope into an online petition he e-mailed to thirty friends. Earnest, plaintive and humane, it made the case for international leaders to use "moderation and restraint" in responding to the attacks, and called for employing "international judicial institutions and international human rights law to bring to justice those responsible for the attacks, rather than the instruments of war, violence or destruction."

"By Monday there were thousands of e-mails in my Inbox," he told me recently. "The server was crashing. It was this moment where the e-mail had hit a chord and was being repeated out through the address books." Within the first two weeks, 515,000 people signed the petition, and before long he'd connected with Blades and Boyd, merged his list with MoveOn's and joined the organization as a full-time staff member.

Starting in summer 2002, much of the antiwar movement flowed through Pariser, and as the drumbeat for war with Iraq grew louder MoveOn's ranks swelled. "There was kind of a strength-in-numbers thing," Pariser recalls. "That's when the surge of people who had been quiet through the first year and a half of the Bush Administration started to realize, This is serious; I need to be involved."

At its apex the stop-the-war-before-it-starts movement was the largest popular uprising on the left in decades. The coalition that organized the protests around the country drew millions into the streets, including everyone from anarchists, Maoists and pacifists to nuns, soccer moms and disaffected Republicans. MoveOn tended to anchor the latter part of the spectrum, as part of the moderate Win Without War coalition. Whereas other groups called out "No blood for oil!" MoveOn's most successful petition was titled "Let the Inspections Work."

Even as the Bush Administration has radicalized so many, and pushed MoveOn toward a more aggressively partisan stance, that original pragmatic sensibility remains woven into the organization's DNA. "Wes and Joan didn't come out of the left," notes Zack Exley, who worked as a union organizer before joining MoveOn in 2002 (and later worked for the Kerry campaign). "Eli hadn't had time to be on the left." For Exley, the freshness of their approach was a revelation. "It was the most exciting kind of atmosphere because they weren't negative or defeated or cynical…they didn't have their ideas set. They kind of had this boundless faith in what their members were capable of doing."

MoveOn staffers echo Exley's characterization, stressing that whatever MoveOn's ideological sensibility ("pragmatically progressive," one offered), it's a product not of its staff's outlook but of the views of its members. "Some groups have a really strong ideological substrate," says organizing director Justin Ruben. "We tend to not be that way.… We believe strongly in the wisdom of crowds, giving people the ability to make choices together. They'll make good choices."

In theory that's all well and good; in practice, it's no small task to figure out just what kind of choices 3.2 million people are interested in making. In his new book *Here Comes Everybody*, Internet theorist Clay Shirky illustrates how dramatically the Internet has lowered the cost of collective action and coordination across barriers of time and space. MoveOn's approach to activism—mass e-mails, instant internal polling, distributed fundraising—takes advantage of this development. Before MoveOn pioneered the online petition, just the simple act of gathering 100,000 signatures would have cost hundreds of thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours of labor. Now MoveOn sends out e-mail petitions several times a month. Or consider this: to manage its lobbying efforts and programs for its more than 4 million members, the NRA has a staff exceeding 500 and a $15 million, 390,000-square-foot office building in Virginia. MoveOn has a staff of… twenty-three. And no headquarters. Twice a week, a dozen of MoveOn's staffers call in from around the country for a strategy session. The organization is so committed to the ethos of the virtual office, it has an internal policy that even when staffers are living in the same city

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they're prohibited from sharing office space.

"What makes it possible," says Ruben, "is that every action taken ends up in our database. It's all in one place and the data set is enormous, which if you're a geek is awesome." When MoveOn sends out mass e-mails, staffers often first test multiple separate subject lines within small sample groups, choosing the subject that's most effective at getting people to act on the e-mail's "ask." Each week they run a tracking poll, surveying a random subsample of members to identify which issues they're following and where their passions lie.

The speed and efficiency of Internet communication allows the organization tremendous flexibility in responding to breaking developments. "Because we are member driven, we 'Chase the Energy,'" Brandzel writes in a manifesto called "The 8 Fold Path," which lays out the MoveOn approach. "Energy flows with news cycles, and the opportunity to make a difference." In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, MoveOn was able to use its member database to set up a website where evacuees could be matched with members who had extra rooms in their houses to share. The site was up just seventy-two hours after the hurricane made landfall in New Orleans, and ended up providing housing to more than 30,000 evacuees, a response far quicker than FEMA's.

MoveOn-ers are quick to point out that technology is just the means, not the end. "The Internet's just a tool," says Brandzel. "I mean, would you call a church a paper-based organization because the Bible is printed on paper?" Just as the Reformation required both discontent with the Catholic Church's corruption and Gutenberg's printing press, MoveOn's rise required both the swelling backlash against post-Gingrich radicalism and the explosive growth of the Internet, particularly among the ranks of the professional classes with Internet access.

Somewhat frustratingly, MoveOn does not keep demographic information about its members, which makes it difficult to know for sure whether the sample of members I spoke with, mostly white and middle class, is representative. But it is clear that they aren't radicals. After the 2004 election, MoveOn attempted to use Internet forums, e-mails and polls to build a platform of sorts, called the Positive Agenda. The results were squarely within the mainstream of the Democratic Party: universal healthcare, clean renewable energy and the restoration of the Constitution and civil liberties. "The idea that MoveOn is like some foaming-at-the-mouth, swinging-from-the-trees liberal interest group is kind of a joke," says influential blogger Jane Hamsher of FireDogLake.com.

"People ask us all the time, you know, Make your members do this or think this," says Pariser. "We just have to politely say, We can't. Even if we wanted to, people click the link or they do the thing that we ask them to if they think it's a useful thing to do. There's no chain of command.

"It's essentially a service organization that helps people who are busy advocate in politics. We're providing something that's valuable to people and using technology to amplify the quality of the service you can get. It's not unlike Netflix or Flickr."

It's a revealing analogy. In many ways MoveOn's relationship to its members looks a lot like a business's relationship

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to its customers. If a product isn't selling, they take it off the shelves. For activists rooted in an earlier generation of social movements, which tended to prize long, disputatious meetings and the unwieldy process of forming bottom-up consensus, this approach is at best alien, at worst insidious. Customers, after all, aren't part of the creation of the product: they're not running the meetings where new packaging is designed; their input is limited to the final result and expressed through the transaction of purchase. And the role of customer imposes no obligations. You are free to buy or not buy, or in MoveOn's case, sign the petition or not sign the petition. Oscar Wilde once complained that the trouble with socialism was that it took "too many evenings." MoveOn holds out the promise of progressive change without the evenings.

Marshall Ganz—who organized with the farm workers, recently ran training workshops for Obama's field staff and now studies and teaches organizing at Harvard's Kennedy School—says much of what MoveOn does is marketing, not organizing. "The genius of the Internet is more the way it can create a marketplace than create organization," he says. "It's important to distinguish between sharing information and forming relationships. Forming a relationship, we make a commitment to work together. Participation in democratic organizations is not just an individual act. It's an act of affiliation with others." If you were to map the arrows of relationship between MoveOn's staff and its members, Ganz points out, nearly all the arrows would run between the members and the staff: you receive an e-mail, you respond, you give money, etc.—but relatively few go from member to member.

"They're gonna send letters to Congress and the President," says Ganz. "And man, we generate a lot of fucking letters. That's great. So what sort of capacity have we created in the process? Have we developed a new leadership? Probably not. Have members learned more about relating to each other? Not so much."

Ganz's criticism is mild compared with that of John Stauber, who founded the Center for Media and Democracy and has written scathingly of MoveOn. According to Stauber, MoveOn has become "primarily a money-raising and marketing arm of the Pelosi wing of the Democratic Party. They clearly haven't shown any interest in building an organization that would empower the millions of people whose e-mail addresses they have.... The so-called MoveOn membership is really just a group of people who are used for fundraising purposes."

Stauber is among a small handful of people on the left willing to express such harsh criticisms on the record. Privately, more progressive activists will make familiar complaints about grievances and frictions that have developed from working together. "In the early days they were great partners and had an interest in building up other progressive organizations," one prominent progressive who's worked with MoveOn told me. "That seems to have changed."

Perhaps the most damning criticism leveled at MoveOn is that by creating a clear and easy outlet for people's frustration and angst, the organization delivers people a false sense of accomplishment. In other words, MoveOn can be tremendously successful without being effective. Consider the vaunted petition, MoveOn's bread and butter. In 1998 a petition with 100,000 signatures would make any politician sit up and take notice, but over time the value has been degraded as more organizations have learned how to leverage the Internet. Clay Shirky calls this the "cost/value paradox" and says it can spell big trouble for MoveOn. As the transaction cost for a specific piece of activism declines, so does its value, since politicians know it doesn't require much effort. One former Democratic Senate staffer told me that when her boss was presented the weekly mail summary, the staff made sure that if an issue had landed on the top of the list as a result of a MoveOn mass e-mailing, it was marked with an asterisk. "They've been selling: Millions of E-mails Sold, the old McDonald's line," says Shirky. "They're now realizing that in a way they're empty calories."

There's a stalking awareness in the organization that the model that has served it so well these past ten years may be approaching its limit.

Talk to MoveOn staff members and they'll say that any method of organizing has its limitations. The organizing model that requires long meetings and vigorous debate can lead to organizations being driven by, in MoveOn spokeswoman Ilyse Hogue's words, "the loudest person in the room," something that cuts against MoveOn's non-shouter ethos. They'll also point out that their approach has led to concrete victories: they spearheaded an effort that blocked the FCC's attempts to allow media cross-ownership in local markets; they were an instrumental part of the campaign to beat back Social Security privatization; and the "caught red-handed" ads they ran in targeted Congressional races in '06 had a real effect in softening support for a number of Republican incumbents. What's more, the model works well enough that people around the world are eager to adopt it. In Australia, a MoveOn-type group called GetUp!, which was advised by Brandzel, played a key role in the recent electoral victory of the country's center-left Labor Party. Last year James Rucker, a former MoveOn staffer, started ColorofChange.org, a MoveOn-style organization focused on African-American political mobilization that now boasts 100,000 members; Avaaz.org, a global justice MoveOn spinoff, has a worldwide membership of more than 3 million members.

All that said, there's also a stalking awareness in the organization that the model that has served it so well these past ten years may be approaching its limit. The organization still can raise money from its members to run ads on TV (like the "Not Alex" anti-McCain ad it recently unveiled), but because of the constant erosion of any e-mail list, MoveOn has to add something like 200,000 members a year just to tread water. This need to constantly refresh the membership base explains, at least in part, MoveOn's heavy focus on media exposure and

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its knack for courting publicity, even controversy. "There's such a huge media component to everything MoveOn does," says a progressive activist who's worked on campaigns with MoveOn. "They have a philosophy that says, Get media; that will get you members."

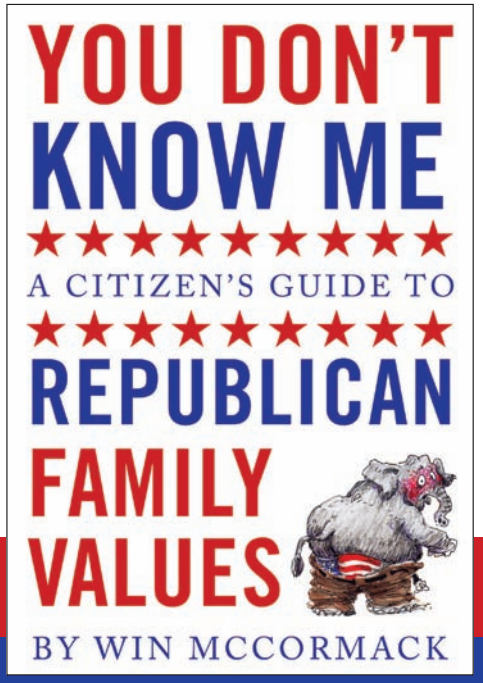
Meanwhile, technology moves fast and MoveOn's primary medium, e-mail, threatens to become outmoded as young people migrate to text messages, social networking sites and IM. In response, MoveOn has branched out to conduct Facebook activism, successfully running a campaign within Facebook to force the site to alter a feature that broadcast private purchasing decisions.

Most significant, MoveOn has massively expanded its focus on developing an offline presence, one grounded in the face-to-face interactions that Ganz invoked. "We had a project for a while called Click Back America, but I think you can't actually click back America," says Justin Ruben. "The things that people do in the real world, away from their computer, also matter.... Our power comes almost entirely from collective action. You can only do so much through the computer."

MoveOn began developing the capacity of offline action in 2004, attempting to build from scratch in a little more than ten weeks a member-based field program in support of John Kerry in swing states. The idea was that MoveOn members would act as precinct captains and canvass their neighbors. Though rushed and somewhat ad hoc, this first foray into concerted offline activity gave birth to Operation Democracy—since renamed MoveOn Councils—the locus of MoveOn's local, physical presence and the conduit for everything from phone banking to house parties to war vigils. Anna Galland, who heads up the councils for MoveOn (and who is, full disclosure, a college friend), says they're ambitiously scaling up. "We're up to 250 local councils, with councils in every state." Members meet in their local councils, and council leaders report to volunteer regional coordinators. "People come from all sorts of backgrounds," says Galland, and get trained in everything from how to run a meeting to leadership development. "We're not just looking for volunteers; we're trying to build a culture of organizing," she says.

For those who came to MoveOn through the simple activism of signing a petition, forwarding an e-mail or donating money, the council provides an opportunity to take the more involved step of actually congregating with other progressives. Crossing this gulf, for millions of people, is no small step. Sandy Tracy, the retired Minnesota high school teacher, now serves as a regional coordinator. She recalls the anxiety she felt before hosting her first house party. "I had fifteen people who signed up to come to that first event," she says. "I felt a little awkward, and I'm going, Oh my gosh! I've got all these people at my house; what are we going to talk about?"

The councils were born of a desire to help elect Kerry, and now that Obama is the presumptive Democratic Party nominee, nearly all of MoveOn's focus has shifted to getting him elected. In many ways, the Obama campaign is built on much



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the same aspirations, ethos and constituency as MoveOn, which is why it wasn't particularly shocking that when the group polled its members in February, 70 percent voted to endorse Obama over Clinton.

Some, though, were surprised. "I was slack-jawed," says one netroots activist, noting that Obama had failed to vote on the Senate resolution that chastised the group for its General Betray Us ad. "They were at the mercy of their membership, who really were enthusiastic about Obama. But this was the guy who threw them under the bus, and they basically said, Beat me! Treat me like shit!"

The subtext here is the larger issue of MoveOn's relationship to a Democratic Party that many feel has co-opted it. "They built up a huge membership because of the war," says CodePink founder Medea Benjamin, "and the press looked at them as the voice of the antiwar movement, and then they betrayed the movement.... They were more concerned with being on the same page with the Democratic leadership than with the rest of the antiwar leadership."

Particularly egregious to Benjamin and others was the failure of Americans Against Escalation in Iraq. Co-founded in January 2007 by MoveOn and run by its then–Washington director, Tom Matzzie, the coalition spent $12 million attempting to force Bush to begin withdrawing troops from Iraq. Its efforts helped push Congressional Democrats to pass a supplemental bill that tied funding to a withdrawal timeline. But after the President vetoed the bill, AAEI focused on running ads against Republicans who'd backed the White House rather than trying to force the Democratic Congressional leadership to cut off funds.

For its antiwar critics, the problem is MoveOn's relationship to a Democratic Party that they feel has co-opted it.

"MoveOn went all out to get a Democratic Congress elected," says Benjamin. "We now have more troops in Iraq, more funding than the Bush Administration even asked for and a guarantee that the war will continue into the next administration."

If CodePink thinks MoveOn is too cozy with the Democrats, Democratic staffers on the Hill have a hard time telling MoveOn and CodePink apart. Several staffers I talked with felt animus toward MoveOn for organizing actions against their bosses. But when they described these actions—sit-ins in their Hill offices, for instance—it became clear they were confusing MoveOn with CodePink and other more confrontational antiwar groups. The resentment is also a result of MoveOn's clumsy Betray Us ad, which became such a high-profile distraction that it allowed conservatives to deflect attention from the war debate. And MoveOn's presence on the Hill, where the battle over escalation was fought, is not particularly strong; in Democratic Congressional offices, it's viewed more as an annoyance than a force. "I've never been in a room where someone says, Let's all check with MoveOn," said the former staffer.

"Of course, I wish the result had been different," says Nita Chaudhary, MoveOn's chief antiwar organizer, of their efforts to prevent the escalation. "But we tried very hard." Chaudhary points out that MoveOn has spent time and effort going after Democrats. Local groups routinely meet with their Representatives to lobby them on the war, and "we ran ads against Democrats—we did this whole backbone campaign with Democrats, trying to get them to stand up against a blank check on the war." But she concedes that the organization made a tactical decision that the best way to bring the war to heel would be through elections, first electing a Democratic majority and now trying to elect Obama along with an "anti–Iraq War majority" in Congress.

To MoveOn's critics in the antiwar movement, the tactical choice to focus most of its energy on defeating Republicans confirmed a nagging sense that, for all its talk about being led by its members, the organization is really run by its staff. Dave Swanson of Democrats.com recalls that in March 2007, "a lot of the real peace organizations were pushing the Barbara Lee amendment" (which would have provided funding only for a withdrawal of forces) "to the point where MoveOn was feeling the pressure. So do they send out a survey, Do you favor the Barbara Lee or the [Democratic] leadership's bill?" (which would have attached timelines but continued funding). "No. Instead, they offered a choice of the leadership's bill or the President's agenda. It was essentially a Stalinist poll. They know damn well what their membership would have said if offered an honest survey."

In response to criticism of that poll, Pariser argued that MoveOn's members were sophisticated enough to understand that the Pelosi bill was the best possible option. But the episode highlighted the difficulty of the situation MoveOn increasingly finds itself in. Over ten years the organization has developed a reliably confrontational posture toward the Republicans in power. It's a necessary feature of an organization that needs to raise money constantly, a rational reaction to the GOP's debased leadership and the expression of a deep and genuine sentiment among its silent majority members, who have simply had enough. But the frustrations of the past two years with a Democratic Congress struggling to deliver any of the things MoveOn members want have served as a teachable moment. In interviews with nearly two dozen of MoveOn's regional coordinators, when I asked what they saw as MoveOn's role in a future Democrat-dominated Washington, they gave without exception the same answer: hold the politicians accountable. "One of their mottoes that really resonates with me is that democracy is not a spectator sport," says Sandy Tracy, the retired schoolteacher. "Average people have elected their officials and sent them off and let them be. We're now paying the price for that."

Should the Democrats retake the White House and add to their Congressional majorities this fall, they would do well to take note of Tracy and the millions like her. Come next spring, if they haven't started withdrawing troops, you just might see Sandy Tracy in the streets with a bullhorn. ■

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The signing of the Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776

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The Color Line Online

As newspapers shrink, minority journalists discover opportunities—and barriers—on the web.

by AMY ALEXANDER

Readers of blogs and websites that focus on people of color will soon notice something different about their favorite online destinations: the majority of posts will be filed from Chicago and Atlanta.

That's because the professional trade organizations for ethnic journalists—the Asian American Journalists Association; the National Association of Hispanic Journalists; the Native American Journalists Association; and the oldest, the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ)—are meeting jointly in Chicago beginning July 23. And that same week, a small association of ethnic minority bloggers is holding its first conference, in Atlanta. The journalists' meeting, Unity '08, has a multimillion-dollar budget and will draw thousands of black, Latino, Native American and Asian journalists together to take part in corporate-sponsored workshops and panels designed to upgrade members' skills for the new era of digital media and to network and job search. (Disclosure: I consulted with Unity organizers on the convention's program.) By contrast, the ethnic blogger convention, Blogging While Brown, will stay in a mid-market hotel, has a shoestring budget, no corporate sponsorship, and is likely to draw about seventy-five guests and panelists.

But while the thousands of minority journalists—many representing old media outlets—troop to conference rooms and banquets at the McCormick Place convention center in Chicago under a cloud of uncertainty, their new media counterparts will hook up in Atlanta eyeing a future bright with promise. Both gatherings are happening as the media industry is at a watershed, with the Internet creating new opportunities for independent entrepreneurs as well as big corporations, and forcing the downsizing of dozens of traditional news organizations. A consequence of all the churning and flux—one largely overlooked by the mainstream press itself in its obsessive chronicling of the shift—is that traditional news-delivery systems, while far from perfect, did provide access and influence to thousands of journalists of color. Yet the massive staff cuts at these traditional media outlets are disproportionately diminishing the ranks of journalists of color. The American Society of Newspaper Editors reported that about 300 journalists of color lost their jobs during the past year, representing roughly 12 percent of those dismissed, while they are just 5 percent of newsroom employees. The NABJ went so far as to issue an open letter to newspaper publishers July 3 declaring, "NABJ will hold you accountable if you do not consider diversity in your hiring and, particularly, firing practices."

In this context, it is of major concern to minority journalists that the blogosphere, for all its kinetic energy and potential for progressive activism, has not produced significant

KORY PENCE

numbers of high-profile nonwhite bloggers. Journalists of color look at the ascendance of the blogosphere and can't help but think, This new boss looks an awful lot like the old boss. And this situation raises some serious questions. Where will readers go for reliable, well-reported, well-documented news and information of particular relevance to people of color? Will the blogosphere accommodate the thousands of experienced journalists of color who fought for decades to gain access to mainstream newsrooms?

"The blogosphere is like the real world in many ways," says Chris Rabb, founder of Afro-Netizen.com, a blog focusing on African-American news, information and activism. "Some of the same obstacles, challenges and inequalities that exist in the real world exist in the blogosphere, too." In 2004, for example, Rabb was the only blogger with a predominantly African-American readership to receive credentials for the Democratic National Convention. This raised concerns among black bloggers that a cyber-hierarchy was emerging, and the nascent "A-list" blogs—The Huffington Post, DailyKos and Talking Points Memo—all seemed to reflect a white middle-class orientation. And that the DNC, by failing to credential more than one African-American blogger, validated that "A-list."

Of course, there aren't supposed to be any "bosses" in cyberspace. And yes, the landscape has changed with the launch of several high-profile blogs and websites by and for people of color. I am an occasional contributor to some of them, including TheRoot.com, which is backed in part by the Washington Post Newsweek Interactive and was co-founded by

Amy Alexander is a 2008 Alfred Knobler Journalism Fellow at The Nation Institute.

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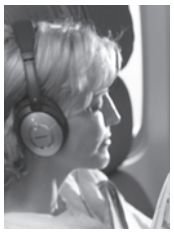

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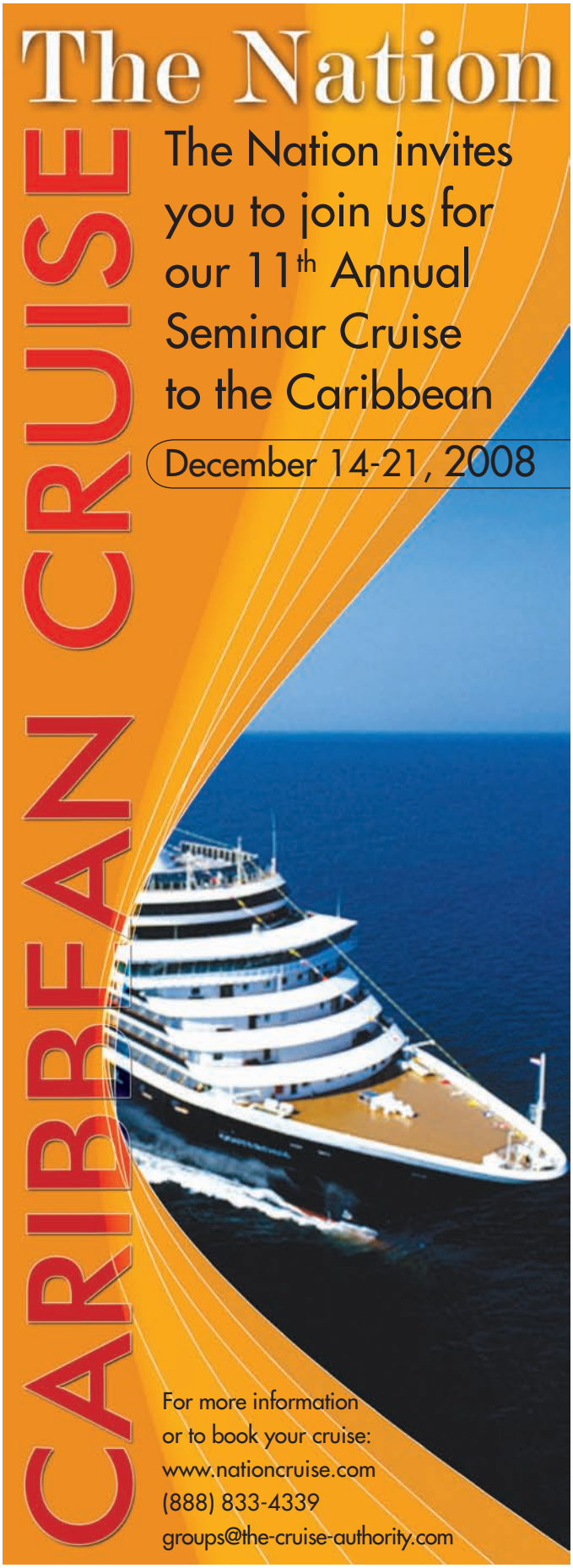
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Harvard black studies professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. The independent BlackCommentator.com has also provided a forum for lively commentary by people of color. Moreover, this year's mid-July meeting of the YearlyKos Convention—now called Netroots Nation—boasts a lineup of panelists and speakers that includes dozens of black, Latino, Asian, gay and working-class bloggers and activists. Markos Moulitsas, founder of DailyKos, said in an e-mail interview that anyone who criticizes his site, or the blogosphere in general, on grounds of racial exclusion simply does not understand the nature of the beast. "It's an open medium. Anyone can participate, and in fact, 95 percent of the time we have no idea if a participant [at DailyKos] is white, black, brown, female, male, gay, straight, left-handed, right-handed, or ambidextrous," Moulitsas wrote, adding that DailyKos is separate from the Netroots Nation annual gathering.

The DNC has also stepped up its outreach efforts to blogs and websites run by people of color. It issued more than a dozen credentials to ethnic bloggers for this year's convention, according to spokesman Damon Jones—although those credentials were granted after some black bloggers, including Wayne Hicks of ElecVillage.com and Pam Spaulding of PamsHouseBlend.com, wrote highly critical posts about having been excluded from the first round.

In economic terms, the entrepreneurial, run-it-from-your-garage nature of the blogosphere limits the likelihood that many people of color can devote themselves full time to building a site or blog. The business model of blogs—small staffs, modest digs, no- or low-pay contributors—shuts out those who don't have the financial resources to allow them to survive by blogging alone. "How many of us can afford to sleep on someone's couch and survive on Cheetos for five years while you're working on your blog, building it up?" asks Rabb of Afro-Netizen.

Compounding that cold-hard-cash reality, at least for journalists of color who've made careers in traditional media, is sometimes an unfamiliarity, or even discomfort, with the pungent advocacy that characterizes much of the blogosphere. The professional identities of black journalists like myself developed under the strictures of "objective" journalism, though we also learned from experience how to cover news that mattered to historically underrepresented communities. The NABJ, the largest professional trade group for journalists of color, was founded in 1975, in large part because of the desire to protect black journalists within the industry—by providing technical training and guidance on surviving the politics of predominantly white news organizations. Yet the NABJ and the two other leading ethnic professional groups, for Latino and Asian journalists, have so far been powerless to protect their members from the rampant downsizing taking place in the news business—or to help them crack the emerging hierarchy of blogs.

Nonetheless, bloggers of color—many of whom are not journalists—are getting busy building their sites, often beneath the radar. Historians will mark 2008 as the year a presidential candidate, Barack Obama, capitalized on the vast reach of the Internet to build a powerful fundraising and information network into his campaign. Yet progressives who have been enthralled with Obama's Internet presence should know

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that it is rooted not just in the algorithms, e-mail lists or social networking framework of Facebook, DailyKos or TPM; it grows also from a community of independent black, women and Latino bloggers who have quietly built a parallel activist universe.

Gina McCauley, a 32-year-old Austin lawyer who organized the Blogging While Brown conference, cites some of the same motivations that led to the founding of the NABJ: a need to protect and secure its members within the larger industry. She conceived the conference last year, "after a lot of black bloggers I know complained that they weren't included in some other big blog conventions." How could that be, I asked, if the freewheeling, open-source nature of the Internet is supposed to be inherently inclusive? "Well, some folks that I know said that they felt shut out of the YearlyKos conference, and even the BlogHer meeting," McCauley said, referring to the previous incarnation of Netroots Nation and to a smaller blog community built around women, which held its first conference three years ago.

"So I thought, Well, the solution to that is simple: we need to hold our own conference," she said.

Her blog, WhatAboutOurDaughters.com, is about a year old, yet in the spring of last year it kicked up a world of trouble for at least one major corporation, the Viacom-owned cable network Black Entertainment Television. The formerly black-owned network had planned to launch a half-hour program called *Hot Ghetto Mess*, based on a website founded by a black woman lawyer in Washington. McCauley objected to the program's depictions of "ghetto culture" (inner-city blacks sporting gold-tooth "grills," drinking malt liquor, engaging in criminal activities) and urged readers of her blog to contact the program's corporate sponsors. Before the program even aired, the network and its advertisers were besieged by complaints. The name was swiftly changed to *We Got to Do Better* (the slogan of the original HotGhettoMess.com website), the premiere date was delayed and ultimately the show was canceled.

McCauley said she hadn't intended to use her blog as a cultural cudgel; she started it in April 2007 out of a desire to reach other people who share her concerns over what she sees as mistreatment of women in general, and of black women in particular.

"I had been involved in community activism since high school, and by the time I finished my undergraduate studies, I was burned out," McCauley said by phone from Austin. "I'm not from the old school civil rights–industrial complex, and it seemed to me that the Internet was a good fit."

The accidental-activist trajectory of McCauley's blog is in contrast to some other projects run by people of color, including ColorOfChange.org and Afro-Netizen, which were formed to encourage activism and provide information for marginalized groups. ColorOfChange, headed by former MoveOn co-director James Rucker, last year accomplished another successful Internet-based action. After members of the Congressional Black Caucus announced plans for the Fox News Network to broadcast a debate sponsored by the CBC, it was deluged with calls and letters from ColorOfChange members. John Edwards withdrew his earlier decision to take part in the debate, followed by Hillary Clinton and Obama. The

MILITANT ATHEISM: A THREAT TO CIVIL LIBERTIES?

In Defense of Religion is a book that attacks head-on and in detail the recent anti-religion books by Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett. It alerts readers to the implications of their intolerant thinking for democracy and personal freedom.

It also makes a case for the great religions at their best and re-thinks what religion essentially is. It proposes that science go beyond question-begging rationalist assumptions and study devotion, worship, mysticism, and the miraculous.

The author, John Gibson (John W. Gibson Jr.) has also written Against Fundamentalism and Plato.

Published by Wheatmark

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result: Fox was ditched, and the CBC got schooled by a quick-response, decentralized Internet campaign. Sweeter still: the "A-list" of progressive blogs also learned a valuable lesson, says Rucker, who is black. "The 'big blogs' had made note of the Fox/CBC situation; they saw the problem…that Fox was malevolent toward blacks. But only after they saw us making a case around the racial aspect did they also say, Yeah, you know this is horrible," Rucker told me. After ColorOfChange posted a petition, it was picked up by other black bloggers, followed by DailyKos and others. "There was a certain kind of bridge-building that happened," which was encouraging, Rucker said. An indication, perhaps, that the blogosphere is capable of making adjustments on race and gender coverage more quickly and profoundly than traditional news organizations.

ColorOfChange, formed in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, works with AfroSpear, a loose collection of blogs and websites that enable readers to take part in online petition drives and e-mail blasts and that set up alert networks. Blogs affiliated with AfroSpear have drawn mainstream coverage to race-related stories that had escaped the attention of the mainstream press, including the Jena Six case in Louisiana and the mishandling of a rape case at a public housing complex, Dunbar Village, in Florida, in which a black single mother was gang-raped by local teens.

Afro-Netizen's Rabb is pragmatic about the emerging hierarchy in the blogosphere. Although some blogs and websites—DailyKos, Huffington Post, TPM—might be viewed as constituting an A-list, bloggers of color are now in a position to redefine the nature of that hierarchy, says Rabb. Critical mass alone, the growing number of bloggers of color, however, cannot force the blog hierarchy to open to nonwhites. "This is more about power dynamics than proportionality," Rabb wrote in an e-mail. "One-third of all movie-goers in this country are Black and yet African-Americans have no real power in Hollywood. Either there is a commitment to leveraging institutional power and individual behavior around involving people of color in politically compatible ways online, or bloggers of color must develop well-resourced entities that do for these communities what predominantly white ones have not," says Rabb. "I suspect the ideal situation is insisting on both."

The NABJ, meanwhile, is still awaiting a response from its open letter to the newspaper industry, and journalists of color are observing the changes around them warily. Gina McCauley told me she wishes that at least a few "traditional" journalists had signed up for Blogging While Brown: "I know a lot of bloggers like to complain about the so-called MSM, and at first I did too," she said. "But I know we have a lot to learn from journalists, about journalistic principles…. I think we have things to teach them, and that they have things to teach us, too." McCauley says that next year, she hopes to see many, many more journalists sign up for her conference. The odds are good that she will. ■

Letters

(continued from page 2)

identified resilience as a cornerstone of homeland security.

Berman's puzzling assertion that resilience is being adopted by industry as a means of dodging regulatory restrictions is bizarre in the extreme. Resilience is the notion that the nation should be focusing on ensuring that our infrastructure, institutions and economy can experience a catastrophic event and "bounce back" to a state of near normalcy as quickly as possible. It transcends the idea that we can somehow prevent catastrophic disruptions and promotes the mature view that rather than parsing the threat we should ensure that we can withstand disruption.

The Reform Institute has been a leading bipartisan voice recommending specific solutions that would lead to greater resilience in key infrastructure components, such as the global supply chain. When the chair of the House Homeland Security Committee designated May as "Resilience Month," the institute was invited as a majority witness to provide supporting testimony.

Robert W. Kelly
Homeland and National Security Center
The Reform Institute

Berman Replies

Washington, D.C.

John McCain resigned as honorary chair of the Reform Institute in 2005 due to "negative publicity." But as my article pointed out, many McCain loyalists, including top fundraisers, former staffers and political allies of the senator, remain involved with the institute and its advisory committees. These links—and the institute's advocacy for McCain on issues like global warming and immigration reform—are extensively detailed in the piece.

More specifically, the concept of "resilience" may indeed be premised on the best of intentions about protecting the country. But the private sector would not embrace it so enthusiastically if there wasn't a potential payoff. As Bateman and Kelly should know, many policies that benefit big business in Washington have bipartisan support.

Ari Berman

Still Puzzled After All These Years

Crawfordsville, Ind.

Did you think you could pull the wool over your puzzle-loving readers' eyes so easily? Announcing the return of Frank W. Lewis's indispensable cryptic crossword to a "weekly" appearance, you announce at the same time your shift to a biweekly summer schedule! This is doublespeak worthy of the Bush Administration.

Stephen Morillo

Correction

Alexander Cockburn's July 21/28 column, "The Ongoing Persecution of Sami Al-Arian," stated that Dr. Al-Arian was "found guilty" on "two relatively minor offenses." In fact, no jury found Al-Arian guilty on any charge. In December 2005, a Tampa jury was hung 10 to 2 in favor of acquittal on nine charges. In a plea deal, the government dropped eight of them and demanded Al-Arian plead guilty to a watered-down version of one charge. Given the Justice Department's vindictiveness and that it might insist on a costly retrial, Al-Arian's lawyers urged him to accept. Under the plea agreement—which the government betrayed—Dr. Al-Arian pleaded guilty to one charge of providing nonviolent services to people associated with a designated terrorist organization.

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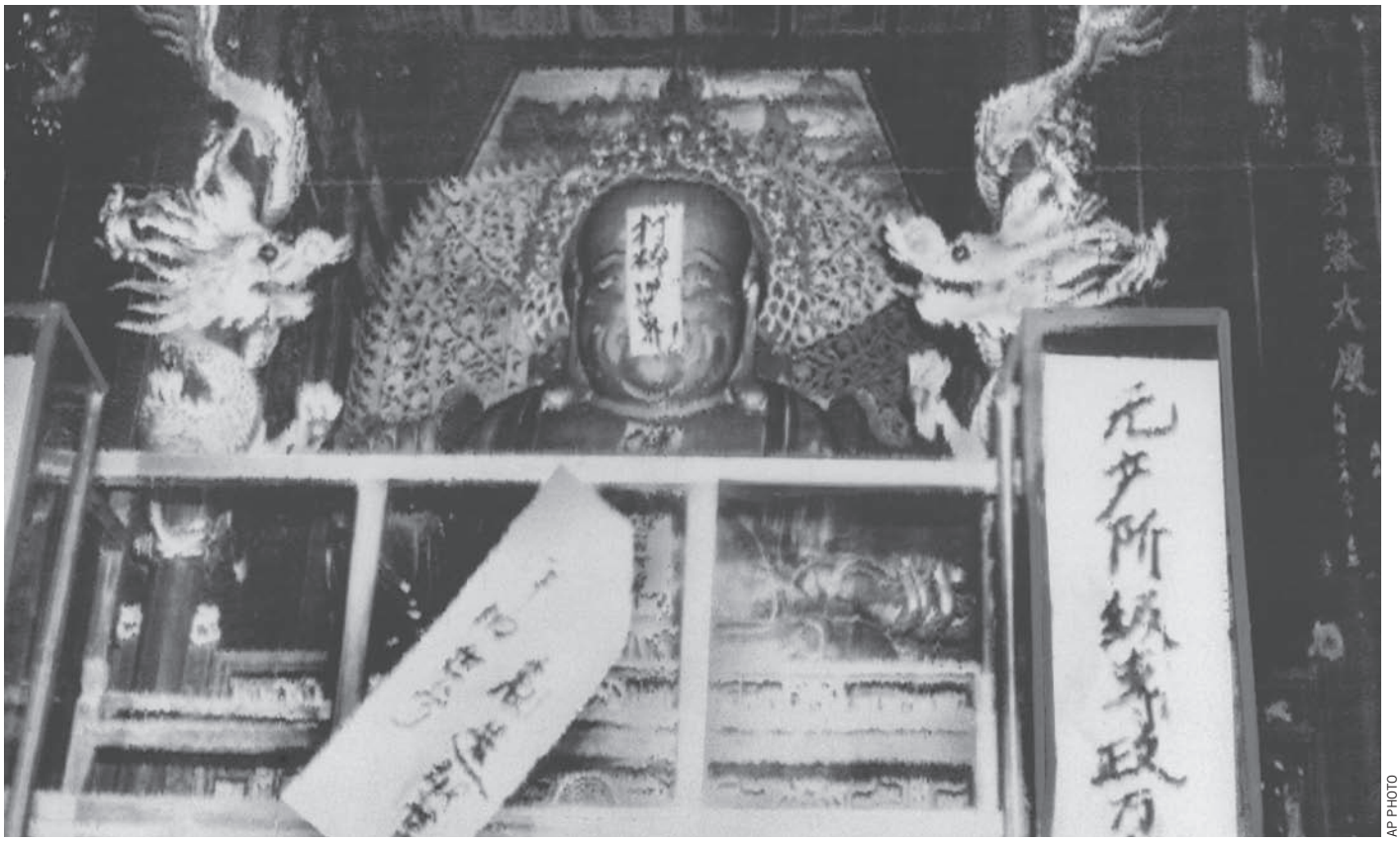
Books & the Arts.



AP PHOTO

The ultrapatriotic Red Guard plastered a Buddha in Lin Yin Temple in Hangchow with signs reading DESTROY THE OLD WORLD and ESTABLISH A NEW WORLD, in August 1966.

Who's Your Buddha?

by HOWARD W. FRENCH

Master Deng Kuan, abbot of the Gu Temple, established in the Sui Dynasty sometime around the turn of the sixth century, was 103 when the writer Liao Yiwu met him while mountain climbing in Sichuan Province, in 2003. A tiny man with small, darting eyes and ears that were extremely hard of hearing, Deng had survived despite an irremediable fondness for his old pipe, which he relighted and puffed every few minutes as he spoke to Liao. A couple of pages into Liao's account of their conversation in *The Corpse Walker*, one quickly grasps that surviving a fondness for tobacco was the very least of the old man's exploits. We commonly think of monks as living quiet lives in retreat, and that indeed was Master Deng's chosen path. Instead, and through no choice of his own, he ended up living a most eventful life in a country that one can credibly claim experienced the most brutal twentieth century of any place on earth.

When we recall China's many traumas, what typically loom large are its long decades of political decay and warlordism, the civil war that pit Nationalists against Communists, and an invasion by Japan. This story line, of course, is even more indomitable in the officially sanctioned accounts of the century that exist in China, where even now serious research on things like the Cultural Revolution is still largely proscribed. For Master Deng, though, whose twentieth century was roughly split in two by the victory of Mao's forces in 1949, the troubles of the pre-"liberation" period seem trivial in comparison with what would follow. "A couple of sentences are sufficient," he tells Liao, dismissing the travails suffered in the early decades of his life.

Readers should be thankful that the old man dispensed with such radical economy in describing what followed. In his telling, as in the other twenty-six oral histories in Liao's book, we are granted a robust new understanding of the modern Chinese experience. "Over the centuries, as old dynasties collapsed and new ones came into being, the temple remained relatively intact," Deng explains, giving his interviewer an understated introduction to the upheaval inflicted on his place of worship. "This is because changes of dynasty or government were considered secular affairs. Monks like me didn't get involved. But the Communist revolution in 1949 was a turning point for me and the temple."

The Corpse Walker
Real-Life Stories, China From the Bottom Up.
By Liao Yiwu.
Translated by Wen Huang.
Pantheon. 320 pp. $25.

Howard W. French, a former career foreign correspondent for the New York Times, *covered China from 2003 to 2008. He teaches at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism and is the author of* A Continent for the Taking: The Tragedy and Hope of Africa.

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Soon after Mao's victory, Deng was dragged out of his temple and stood up before a crowd, accused of accumulating wealth without engaging in physical labor, and spreading "feudalistic and religious ideas that poisoned people's minds." People stepped forward to denounce him, and the crowd that gathered responded on cue, howling slogans like "Down with the evil landlord" and "Religion is spiritual poison." Some spat on him. Others punched and kicked. "No matter which temple you go to, you will find the same rule: monks pass on the Buddhist treasures from one generation to the next," Deng says. "Since ancient times, no abbot, monk, or nun has ever claimed the properties of the temple as his or her own. Who would have thought that overnight all of us would be classified as rich landowners! None of us has ever lived the life of a rich landowner, but we certainly suffered the retribution accorded one."

In this single incident, one already finds crystallized many of the signal features of the revolutionary era's mass politics: flamboyant and typically baseless scapegoating, slogan-based campaigns aimed not just at inciting the fury of the masses but at channeling it against ever-shifting ideologically designated "enemies," and vicious and often unrelenting sectarian attacks. By Master Deng's reckoning, between 1952 and 1961 this meant he endured more than 300 "struggle sessions," as these organized hazings were known in the revolution's euphemistic terminology. In his area of Sichuan Province, he tells Liao, by 1961 "half of the people labeled as members of the bad elements had starved to death."

In 1978, a ban on religious teaching that dated from early in the revolution was lifted, and a few years later the rebuilding of the Gu Temple, and hundreds of others around China, got under way in earnest, aided by donations from people who had kept their faith in secret. No longer the target of punishing political campaigns, Master Deng has other worries: the designs of predatory local officials who see temples like his as cash cows or comfortable digs for their gambling parties. "A couple of months ago, some officials showed up and set up their mah-jongg tables right inside the temple," he says.

> They played that gambling game all day. Some ended up losing money. They walked into my room and wanted to get a loan from me. I did "lend" some to them. You know they will never pay back.... The officials are so powerful, and can destroy you at a whim. The chief of the Religious Affairs Bureau shamelessly calls himself the parent of all gods.

With a little variation, the phrase "parent of all gods" entered the news during the recent crisis in Tibet, when the "autonomous region's" party secretary declared that the Communist Party was the "real Buddha" for Tibetans.

In its standard telling abroad, the story of the China that Mao built is all neatly hewn sections paved with well-worn flagstone. Who hasn't heard of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution or the Great Leap Forward? The well-read will also know the Anti-Rightist Campaign of the late 1950s, during which the party went on a nationwide witch hunt for supposed liberals, reactionaries and capitalist roaders. Thus, the country lurches back and forth between famous moments of almost hallucinatory revolutionary madness and a semblance of normalcy about which we hear very little.

As histories go, this manner of relating the Chinese experience amounts to a way of averting one's eyes from something that may seem too hard to comprehend. It also encourages a kind of blurry forgetting, a storing away of things on a high, musty shelf that has been officially encouraged by China's leaders, who are most keen to manage this story because they have the most to lose from a more vigorous and thorough telling. This is the ultimate sense of the famous posthumous verdict by Deng Xiaoping, who judged that Mao had been 70 percent "correct" and 30 percent wrong. Yes, Mao's errors, like the 30 million or more deaths from starvation caused by the crash industrialization of the Great Leap Forward, were doozies, but by and large he kept the country on the right path, avers Deng Xiaoping. Deng's past has also benefited from studious airbrushing to avoid mussing up the standard portrait of him as a kindly, strong and nearly infallible second father to the nation. His enthusiastic role in violently suppressing "rightists" in the late 1950s has been placed out of bounds by the gatekeepers who determine which subjects can be researched and which cannot.

Master Deng's life, and almost every other oral history in Liao Yiwu's new book, appropriately subtitled *Real-Life Stories, China From the Bottom Up*, gives the lie to this entire vision, making this a deeply subversive book. I do not mean the reader should expect a tract or treatise on Chinese politics. Instead, Liao casts aside the official "facts" of events and replaces them with "memories"—with the resulting contrast between the censored record and interior consciousness revealing a post-1949 China that has never stopped being a traumatic place. At their root, all of Liao's "real-life" stories share something fundamental: a fantastic, dreamy and nightmarish quality. Read alone, many of them invite questions of believability, especially for people without the benefit of familiarity with China. None have the feeling of pure artifice, but as with much of the writing of the late Ryszard Kapuscinski, with whom Liao shares more than a passing likeness, each provokes a moment's thought about its relationship to the truth.

The 49-year-old Liao was born in Sichuan Province just as China's mad dash to become an economic superpower, the Great Leap Forward, was getting under way. At the outset of the Cultural Revolution, in 1966, his late father, a small landlord, was jailed as a "class enemy." In fact, the family had been targeted for persecution since 1959 when his mother, a music teacher, was fired from her primary school job for "bourgeois thinking." After being caught trading ration coupons for food, Liao's mother ran away with her son and a younger sister to Chengdu, Sichuan's big provincial capital, where they lived a precarious life without a residence permit. Liao left home two years later, at age 10, hoping to find his father and eventually making a living through a succession of small hard-knock jobs, hauling rocks or rolling cigarettes. In the early 1970s, his father was released from jail and allowed to teach at a rural middle school. Schools had been closed throughout the country amid the political chaos, and Liao, already in his early teens, went to primary school in the same town where his father worked.

In 1982 Liao's first poem, "Dawn," appeared in *Xing Xing*, an influential poetry journal, winning him wide attention. By 1988 Liao had just turned 30, and his poems had already won him a national reputation, along with twenty poetry prizes and awards. When the Chinese army violently put down the student-led protests at Tiananmen Square, Liao wrote an epic poem, which he titled "Massacre." Knowing it could not be published in the country, he recorded it on cassette, giving a tape to a friend and allowing it to be copied and passed along from person to person. Word of the poem spread fast, leading to the author's arrest, and in March 1990 Liao was imprisoned and spent the next four years locked up.

If the author's sensitivity for injustice, a consistent focus of his writing, springs from the treatment of his parents that he witnessed as a child, much of his technique, including a finely honed sense of voice and dialogue, was forged in prison, where he shared cells with hardened criminals, eccentrics and outcasts from China's socialist order. In *The Corpse Walker* Liao's interviews are presented in standard question-and-answer format, a

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method that would seem to leave little room for style, but the effect of reading them is almost akin to that of reading the work of a skilled short-story writer, one with a talent for getting out of the way and letting the yarn unravel, as if all on its own. Part of this stems, undoubtedly, from what might be called remarkable people skills—the ability to sidle up to someone and get a sympathetic current flowing, without the subject ever the wiser that he is being pumped.

One safely assumes, too, that many of the interviews are reconstructions of conversations, and far from strictly literal transcriptions. This allows the author to control their pace and to stamp them, albeit judiciously, with his own style. There is much more to the effort, though. To pull together work like this one must be a tireless researcher and interviewer. If it is true that most people have an interesting story, even those who are not aware of it, Liao's characters, at once regular and extraordinary, are not the product of a random cull. Some of his subjects resulted from prolonged wanderings in a particular area. Some have been introduced to him by friends, typically other writers. And some of the most striking pieces, finally, are reconstructions of conversations he had with fellow prison inmates.

Liao's powerful counterhistory casts doubt on the very nature of the China we think we know.

As to what one should make of the result, Liao is a kind of pointillist, bravely doing what one writer can to fill in the vast blank spaces that constitute China's modern artistic and social record. Since the revolution, Beijing has been obsessed with few things more than controlling China's story, which runs the gamut from rewriting history to censorship of the news and exercising tight control over publishing to arresting, monitoring or outright "banning" writers who stray too far within, or often from, the official fold.

Liao has faced all these repressive measures. In its first edition, in September 1999, 30,000 copies of the book were printed by a medium-sized Beijing publishing house. The book was reprinted five times over the first few months, then was suddenly banned. Two years later, a large Chinese house published an expanded version under a new title, but it too was quickly banned. Liao's other twenty-odd works were mostly published overseas in Chinese or self-published through foreign websites. The government will not issue him a passport, preventing him from traveling abroad, and he has been reduced to the status of a nonperson by China's domestic media, which amounts to a ban. Still, in a testament to his persistence and the ways of change in China, where the government, despite its best efforts, can no longer control everything, he is widely read within the country, his books published in black market underground editions.

Liao secures a small measure of safety, perhaps, in collecting the words of others, instead of describing Chinese society himself. Yet given the invisibility of nearly all but the sanctioned stories within China, out of the voices of Liao's would-be ordinary folks emerges a powerful counterhistory, whose authenticity derives in no small part from his chosen stylistic format.

As such, Liao's tales are not suited for reading in isolation, an experience that risks leaving the reader merely charmed or enchanted by the seeming whimsy at work in the choice of many of the subjects, and indeed in the facts of their lives: a safecracker who escapes from prison by swimming through a cesspool, hides in a morgue to escape arrest and later takes refuge in an army bus; a peasant who fancies himself emperor; and the "corpse walkers" of the title, who face mob justice for their role in carrying out an obscure rite for the deceased wife of a former Nationalist officer.

Read four or five of these interviews, though—there is little chance of stopping there—and something powerful begins to happen. Doubts about the plausibility of this or that detail begin to morph into doubts of an altogether different kind, ones that seem close to the heart of the author's project. And these big new doubts go to the very nature of the China that we think we have known.

Through Liao's characters, the reader familiar with the standard histories comes away with a feeling that the high-water marks of supposed madness are exaggerated, in the sense that what has passed for more "normal" times emerge as far crazier than is generally allowed for. The new *new* China, meanwhile, the booming post-reform China of seemingly unending high-speed growth, also comes across as a place of unrelenting trauma and even craziness. Yes, this China is qualitatively different from the Maoist China of old—and certainly less violent—but it is just as disorienting, just as hard to fully come to terms with, for the Chinese and for foreigners.

The elderly in this book spend their time contemplating a past that is too mean and grotesque to digest properly. At one point Zhang Meizhi, the 84-year-old widow of a former local official in southern China who was executed, along with Zhang's brother, in front of her during the 1952 Land Reform campaign, tells Liao, "I'm trying to make peace with the past." If the summary executions for having been declared a class enemy were not enough, the tongues of the two men were cut out for use in traditional medicine. Zhang was then locked up for forty days, during which time her 2-year-old daughter starved to death. As the persecution of these so-called rich peasants continued, Zhang's eldest son fled the village, taking refuge in an underground vegetable cellar next to a cultivated field, where he stayed in secret for two years. Eventually he was discovered, and a younger brother who fed him surreptitiously was shot dead by the police. The fugitive son was given a life sentence for antirevolutionary crimes, which was commuted only after thirty years in prison. "I grew up in a family with generations of educated people," Zhang tells Liao. "We had a glorious family history. I used to keep a record of my family history. The Poor Peasants Revolutionary Committee dug it out and burned it. My house was so thoroughly searched that there was no place for a mouse to hide."

The rootless younger people who figure in this book, meanwhile, spend their time trying to find a footing in a world stripped of the normal bearings. There is the migrant worker from Sichuan Province, whose life reads like a précis of China's new "masses," those hundreds of millions of commoditized laborers who drift anonymously into the cities, hoping to catch a break. Zhao Er has toiled as a farmer, in a wildcat coal mine, as a construction worker and a restaurant hand, and has slept in a plastic tent in Chengdu owned by an enterprising woman who barks on the sidewalk at dusk each day to pile in as many short-stay "tenants" as she can.

"In the wintertime, when bodies are crammed in together, you get pretty warm," Zhao says. "Sometimes it's so warm that you sweat simply by blowing a fart." Later he recounts the tale of a woman he knew from his village who masquerades as a shoeshine lady to cover for her real trade, prostitution. "I don't blame those poor women. Luckily my wife had three kids, otherwise, she would also be turned into a whore."

One cannot read Liao's book and not be impressed by how many people survive by lying, often confessing to imaginary charges or reciting accusations back to one's accuser, accepting them as one's own. This is brought to particularly vivid life by the story of Tian

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Zhiguang, a "grave robber," or at least someone who has been arrested for supposedly robbing graves. "From the unexpected discovery of fortune to our sudden arrest, everything happened so fast," Tian said, explaining how the discovery of antique gold coins buried beneath his house led to his arrest on a false pretense. Police dismissed his explanation with a laugh and carted him off to jail, where the inmates initially took Tian for the leader of a grave-robbing "triad," or gang, and treated him with respect. Weeks later, when they learned he was an ordinary inmate, he was given a belated initiation, which consisted of vicious beatings while being forced to hoist a fully laden prison cell chamber pot on his head. This causes Liao, the author, to remark with bemusement, "I guess prisoners are getting more creative when it comes to torturing people."

Two weeks after his initiation, Tian is offered a chance at redemption through the detention center's "Confession Leads to Leniency" campaign. Three hundred inmates from nine cells are called into the courtyard to appear before local police and Communist Party leaders, who repeat over and over that "confessions will lead to reduced sentences." Later, the bullying overlord among the inmates urges him to recant. "Those officials out there are all liars. Under normal circumstances, they trick you into confessing, promising you the reward of a reduced sentence. Once you tell everything, they never keep their promise. You probably end up with a bullet in your head. However, this campaign is different. The media has written about it. If those officials renege on their promises, they will lose face and credibility."

Throughout his ordeal, Tian has remained scrupulous, and he responds by saying what he has told the authorities from the start: "I don't really have anything to confess." The boss of the cellblock, sensing a chance to win points, orders his underlings to rough up Tian in order to change his mind. "The cell was like a classroom and every 'student' was asked to write a paper," Tian relates. "Your confession needs to be sensational," the boss tells them. "Don't try to simplify and whitewash. The more serious your crimes are, the better it makes me look."

Old Master Deng has a wonderfully pithy explanation for the toll that this kind of behavior has on a society—a toll that remains in China today, thick with rampant distrust and unmoored by the erosion of values one encounters at so many turns here. As Deng has said, "There's a Chinese saying. When a snake bites a human being there is an antidote. But when a human being bites a fellow human being, there is no hope." ■

Fathers and Sons

by MATT STEINGLASS

I Love Dollars
And Other Stories of China.
By Zhu Wen.
Translated by Julia Lovell.
Penguin. 240 pp. Paper $14.

"Socialism Is Great!"
A Worker's Memoir of the New China.
By Lijia Zhang.
Atlas & Co. 357 pp. $24.

The Bitter Sea
Coming of Age in China Before Mao.
By Charles Li.
Harper. 283 pp. $25.95.

It's almost an insult to consider Zhu Wen as a man of his times. Writers like him are above all that, timeless: like Catullus, Balzac or Daniil Kharms, Zhu Wen is one of those writers who seems to leap from the pages of his stories, grinning obscenely and poking the reader in the abdomen. In the opening lines of the title piece of *I Love Dollars*, the story with which Zhu Wen burst onto China's literary scene in 1994, the narrator, in bed with a promiscuous divorcée, is surprised by a visit from his father, who addresses the woman: "And you would be Miss?" The narrator intercedes: "I didn't want Father to think the woman his son had just been sleeping with was some random pickup, a divorced older woman. I'd lose his respect. What the hell do you care what she's called? I said to Father, signaling to Wang Qing to get lost." Wang Qing leaves, smiling cryptically and clutching something in her fist, perhaps her panties. As his father scolds him for skulking inside and not getting more fresh air, the narrator silently retorts: "Ah, but Dad, some things, unfortunately, you can still only do inside. One day, one day I dream of doing them outside, on sun-drenched grass, happy and uninhibited, just like an animal. You never gave me the courage I really need; you forgot, just like your father did with you."

This is weird, twisted territory, but it's the familiar weird, twisted territory of Kafka's "The Judgment" or Freud's chapter on "The Embarrassment-Dream of Nakedness." The sudden visit from the father after sex—who among us hasn't been unpleasantly surprised by a postcoital intrusion from the superego, wondering what the hell we are doing, at our age, in bed with this random person and how we plan to fulfill our parents' expectations of us? These are primal, ancient themes; people have been telling stories like this since Ham saw Noah naked. They remain fresh in part because of their psychosexual immediacy, and in part because not just anyone can tell them well. It requires savage irony and a gleeful contempt for public morals.

That said, let's get down to insulting Zhu Wen by considering him as a man of his times. Zhu Wen's savage irony and gleeful contempt for public morals are not entirely his own; they reflect the stinging disillusionment of Chinese intellectual culture in the aftermath of the Tiananmen massacre. The most surprising aspect of the cultural explosion that has come out of China since the early 1990s is its vicious sense of irony. The sarcasm of novelists like Yu Hua (*Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*), filmmakers like Ye Lou (*Summer Palace*) and bloggers like the foul-mouthed Beijing provocateur Wang Xiaofeng (wangxiaofeng.net) is all the more striking coming from a country whose mass culture is for the most part sugar-sweet and commercially conformist. And to some extent, it is a reaction to that very commercial conformism. In a post in April ridiculing the popularity of "Anti-CNN" T-shirts in the wake of CNN's coverage of the Olympic torch protests, Wang Xiaofeng wrote:

> Chinese people react really quickly: over there they are busy cursing CNN, over here they have already released a line of products.... Right now my biggest regret is that I bought a T-shirt printed with "I'm fed up! Leave me alone!", such a classic, but I later threw it away.

The last sentence refers to the fad of "cultural shirts," popular in 1991 before the government banned them, bearing cynical slogans like "Getting rich is all there is." Already by the early 1990s, just a decade into capitalism, the leading edge of Chinese culture was honing a Sex Pistols–like postmodernist strategy of celebrating empty commercialism in order to ridicule it and in order to profit from it. And this was the cultural moment that nourished the scabrous honesty of Zhu Wen's *I Love Dollars*.

If I were as honest a writer as Zhu Wen, I would probably pause at this point to note that I am completely unqualified to write about China. I have done a little reporting in China and have lived for the past five years in Vietnam. Getting an

Matt Steinglass is the Hanoi correspondent of the German news agency DPA.

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American who lives in Vietnam to write about China is a bit like getting a Chinese person who lives in Mexico to write about the United States. On the other hand, China did rule Vietnam for a thousand years, and over the past few decades the two countries have been traveling very similar trajectories, so there is much in Zhu Wen's work that feels familiar, and painfully so. Today's Chinese writing and art often convey what Vietnamese would say if they only dared; the powerful Vietnamese cultural preference for moderation and ambiguity, which may have saved the country from the worst excesses of Maoism, also mitigates today against its ability to produce a writer like Zhu Wen. In a conversation I had early this year in New York City with the up-and-coming Vietnamese surrealist artist Nguyen Manh Hung, he said he envied Chinese artists' sensational directness. "They can present, in a single image, sex, violence, politics and tradition," Hung said. "In Vietnam, we can't do sex, violence or politics, so we're left with tradition."

One thing the two countries share, having tacitly upended their value systems over the past thirty years, is a sharp but publicly repressed problem of generational conflict. For Hung, whose father was a MiG-21 pilot during the war, this has meant an ongoing obsession with painting fighter planes, which he depicts as simultaneously ridiculous and glorious. Zhu Wen's stories depict similarly conflicted feelings toward the older generation. In the story "I Love Dollars," the narrator watches with a mix of pride and shame as his father argues down a middle-aged, red-armbanded street monitor when she tries to fine him two yuan for littering. Why, the narrator thinks, in this era of dollars, would anyone waste precious time on such trifles? His father retorts: "If we'd surrendered those two yuan, I'd feel we'd shown a lack of respect, see? Two yuan ought to get the respect due to two yuan." There is something gracious in the father's outmoded values, his competence at street-level skills that were critical under the socialist system but are now obsolescent. The narrator confronts a similar absurdity in his own value system in one of the story's central scenes, when he takes his father to a dance hall to try to get both of them laid and must explain to the disbelieving older man that all the women there are prostitutes:

> "But they all look so young," Father meditated wonderingly, his face sagging faintly, but perceptibly.
>
> Dad, I said, you have to get over

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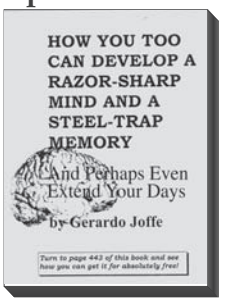

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this psychological barrier, it's terrorizing you.... Try and be a bit more like me, forget your family, and just take a look around you.

As the narrator looks around, he tries to talk himself into the ludicrous thesis that the experience of a hundred-dollar trick is twenty times as enjoyable as the five-dollar one. This is the free-market ideology of progress, right? Yet he can't quite convince himself, and his inability to do so is embodied in his continuing respect for his father—his old Communist youth-brigade-organizing father. In Confucian societies like Vietnam and China the young dollar worshipers, try as they might, will never be able to "forget their families." Meanwhile, in a strange reversal of Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, it is the old Bolsheviks who still have a sense of respect for traditional norms, for family and for value systems that are complex and overlapping, not simple or absolute; and it's the young capitalist entrepreneurs who are the new nihilists, honoring nothing, stripping society down to a purely materialist measure whereby any human quality can be denominated into hard currency.

Zhu Wen's writing is far too formally inventive to be treated as sociology. (The strength of his voice in English owes much to a terrific colloquial translation by Julia Lovell.) Some of what felt revelatory in 1994, when Zhu Wen began publishing stories, is by now old hat to Chinese audiences. Zhu Wen has turned from writing to directing films—*Seafood* in 2001, which won a prize at the Venice Film Festival, and *South of the Clouds* in 2004. And one wonders how the author of *I Love Dollars* is absorbing the metaphorical implications of the fall of the dollar and the rise of the yuan. Still, part of the energy of *I Love Dollars* feeds on a social tension that's just as critical today as it was fifteen years ago: the great generational fault line that runs down the middle of Asia's Confucian Communist-capitalist hybrids. How do you fulfill your obligations to your elders when the values those elders spent their lives upholding have been explicitly rejected by the new society?

In Lijia Zhang's telling, that dilemma very nearly wrecked her life. Zhang is not a formally inventive writer, and her memoir *Socialism Is Great!* is best treated as sociology, an exploration of gender, career and especially mother-daughter tensions in the rapidly changing Chinese society of the 1980s. In the mid-'80s, when Zhang was a promising, curious middle-school student with a budding taste for literature, her mother took advantage of a government offer to certain workers to retire and hand over their safe jobs to their children. The family was poor, and in a society with a recent memory of Mao's economic disasters, lifetime employment at a state-owned factory was what passed for security. So instead of applying to university, Zhang submitted to her mother's will, inherited her toolbox and prepared to spend the rest of her life repairing gauges at an ICBM factory in Nanjing.

Zhang describes her life in those years as a pressure cooker of restrictive obligations to family and country. In the tiny flat she shares with her mother, grandmother and sister—the men in the family, mercifully, are rarely around—she bickers with her mother for selling her beloved schoolbooks, including novels such as Ba Jin's 1930s trilogy *Home*, *Spring* and *Autumn*. Her factory *danwei*, the "work unit" that once regulated much of Communist life, is sometimes a supportive social network but more often a claustrophobic cell. Zhang's efforts to free herself by enrolling in a distance-learning university, doing freelance translations into English and finally pursuing a series of romantic affairs, provide moments of liberation, but she keeps getting pulled back into her old job.

Zhang depicts China in the liberalizing '80s with the disappointed nostalgia a Western baby boomer might have for the '60s. In such an impoverished, tightly restricted society, almost everything new looked like freedom, and it was natural to assume that all freedoms—economic, intellectual, sexual—must run together. She thrills when her cultured married lover, Liang, presents her with a new foreign book, "bursting with individual initiative. Liang had become the connection between my small, stagnating well and a vibrant intellectual scene in the fast-changing world." The book is the autobiography of Lee Iacocca. Later, Liang promises to take her with him to America on a student scholarship: "I personally much prefer Nietzsche to Schopenhauer because his attitude to life was so much more positive. If we are determined to do something, we will!"

"Jerk," the reader thinks, and so Liang proves to be. As in the States in the '60s, the pursuit of sexual liberation in a climate of sharp gender inequality largely meant men taking advantage of women. Zhang's subsequent efforts at self-realization seem to have worked out better; she ended up marrying (and divorcing) an Englishman and becoming a freelance journalist for the Western press in Beijing. But none of that is included in the book, which ends in 1989 when, in her own telling, Zhang led a protest at her factory in support of the student demonstrators at Tiananmen and was arrested for chanting "Long live democracy!" and reading the Bei Dao poem "Answer": "Let me tell you, world,/ I—do—not—believe!"

It is a strange moment at which to cut off the narrative. Unlike the revolutions in Eastern Europe, China's revolt, and in particular Zhang's, led to nothing, or not to anything clear, and it no longer seems at all adequate to treat 1989 in such a simplistic fashion, as a moment of pure liberation. What connection does Zhang draw between her personal adolescent rebellion in the '80s, the failed political rebellion of '89 and her life today as a divorced international media-industry professional in ultramodern Beijing? Did the generational political energy of '89 break on the shoals of Tiananmen and fragment, swirling off into a million private revolutions and generating today's Chinese commercial and creative classes? Or is her vision a darker one, as in Ye Lou's *Summer Palace*, where the young lovers who danced on the barricades in '89 drift into lives of emotional exile, trapped by the memory of that exhilarating moment, while shopping malls and superhighways reshape the very landscape of the country they rebelled in?

If Zhang seems to be not yet done rebelling against her mother, Charles Li long ago settled the war with his father that wracked his adolescent years. Li, a linguistics professor at UC Santa Barbara, also hails from Nanjing, but a Nanjing Zhang

Archival Footage, Subjects Unidentified

Someone knew once
but we've forgotten

who and on what
street, which now-

emptied town.
Brittle-film bodies

waver or coalesce
into shuddering

tree rings, some
record of what we've

weathered. You call and
I pick up the phone,

I answer; you say
my name, say *it's me*.

NANCY KUHL

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would not recognize: the World War II capital of the puppet regime installed by the Japanese Army. As Li's memoir, *The Bitter Sea*, relates, his father was a major figure in the splinter Nationalist faction the Japanese put in power, and became a senior official in the quisling regime. Until he was 5, Li lived with his mother and five siblings in a vast mansion in a walled compound. When Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang retook the city in 1945, Li's father was arrested and sentenced to prison, though for some reason not to a bullet in the head like the other senior members of the collaborationist regime. The family's belongings were confiscated, and they spent a year living in a filthy slum before Li was sent to Shanghai to stay with an aunt.

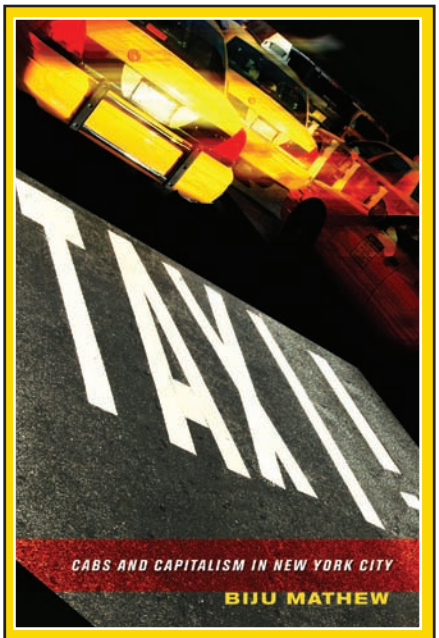
Li stayed in Shanghai through the Communist takeover. Then, in 1950, his aunt took him to Hong Kong to rejoin his parents. (The Kuomintang had released Li's father just before Nanjing fell to the Red Army.) It is here that Li's contest of wills with his domineering father begins. Li's father beats him when he fails to conform at school, relenting only when his son starts to excel at an expensive private academy. Constantly scheming at some sort of political comeback, the father becomes increasingly admiring of Mao. Ultimately, he succeeds at coaxing Li to forget about attending college in America, like other graduates of his elite school, and instead to cross the border into China to undergo political re-education in the hopes of attending a Chinese university.

Li spends a miserable famished year in a re-education camp at the start of the Great Leap Forward before finally being told that he will never be allowed to study in China: the Communist Party knows he has been sent over as a political feeler by his father and wants nothing to do with them. Li suddenly realizes this is true—his father has been using him as a probe. Returning to Hong Kong, he confronts his father and breaks off all contact. Ultimately, he wins a scholarship to Bowdoin College and reconciles with his aging, increasingly broken father over the course of decades.

Li's sympathetic portrait of his father, from a vantage point decades after his death, is an interesting model of the difficulties the strict Confucian family model has sustained during a century of violent social upheaval. Born in an impoverished village in Shandong around the turn of the century, Li's father had been phenomenally successful, attending Peking University and then studying law, first at Tokyo University and then at Oxford. He became deputy foreign minister under Wang Jing-wei's Nationalist government in the early '30s. But in many ways, he remained a man of the nineteenth century, and Li finally concludes that he had expected too much: "In my heart, I had wanted him to be something other than who he *could* be—a one-dimensional man who didn't have the faintest idea how to relate to his family, a man who had for most of his life behaved according to the traditions that had served his ancestors for generation after generation."

The turn of the twenty-first century is hardly the first age in which Confucian filial piety has been tested by revolutions in social norms. Li's father's lifetime saw the fall of the Imperial state, the advent first of Nationalist republicanism and then of Communism—both of which explicitly rejected Confucian ideology—and ultimately the rise of the modern consumer capitalist "Asian tigers" of Hong Kong and Taiwan. But none of these social revolutions succeeded in knocking out the Chinese family. In fact, if China is like Vietnam, it may be that each Chinese revolution has adapted itself to the Confucian family rather than the other way around. More than forty years ago in Vietnam, it was the family that sent its sons south to fight for honor and country; the Communist Party succeeded by taking advantage of these powerful family norms. Twenty years later, when the party launched its program of liberalizing reforms, it was families that (in contrast to the failed reforms in the USSR) eagerly started businesses, pooled their capital and planted rice for export. The Confucian family was the engine of the party, and the Confucian family is today the engine of capitalism.

At the end of Zhu Wen's story "I Love Dollars," the narrator, back in bed with Wang Qing, finally arrives at a gesture he considers worthy and noble: he asks the divorcée if she will sleep with his father. His debauched, monetarized value system, a caricature of capitalist materialism, is ultimately not enough; he needs to demonstrate that he is a pious son, albeit in a madly unconventional fashion. And isn't he right? This is what renders accounts like Lijia Zhang's, with its simplistic twinning of liberation from familial tyranny and access to capitalism and Western culture, so unsatisfying. Women bear far more of the burdens of the Confucian family, and reap far fewer rewards, so it is understandable that Zhang's rejection of traditional roles is more uncompromising than Zhu Wen's or Li's. Still, are we really so confident of the merits of individualism and the obsolescence of filial piety? From the first page of the story "I Love Dollars" to the last, the supposedly greedy, hedonistic individualist of a narrator is actually concerned with nothing but winning his father's respect. Do we like him less for that? Or more? ■



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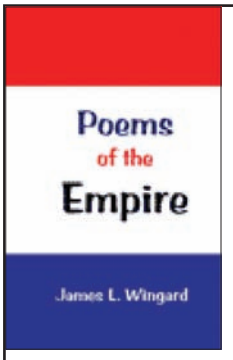

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Politics without a clean-up crew: the scene at Tiananmen Square on May 28, 1989, as the students' strike enters its third week

Strong Medicine

by MELISSA HOLBROOK PIERSON

In a 2004 piece by the Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang, recently exhibited at the Guggenheim, a pack of life-size tigers writhe in midair, bristling with scores of arrows. They should be dead, with all those wounds. Yet they still live—or appear to. There is no more perfect emblem of China, or so might agree Ma Jian, on the basis of his new novel, *Beijing Coma*, in which the country is portrayed as "a vast graveyard" with "a gruesome history."

Detailing just how gruesome is part of Ma's project, and it takes nearly 600 pages to record a mere slice of the brutality and carnage wreaked by a government bent on controlling every aspect of its people's lives, from the way they profess their love (only recently could anything more direct than "You're nice" be uttered out loud) to their reproductive fulfillment. Then, whenever a soldier shot a civilian, "the victim's family was made to pay for the bullet."

Ma closely surveys those costs from a distance. His books banned in China since 1987, he lived in self-imposed exile in Hong Kong for two years and has lived in London since 1997. His first book of fiction was *Stick Out Your Tongue*, set in a modern Tibet of lost illusion. Published in 1987, it is a brief chain of telegraphically arresting visions of life in the so-called Tibet Autonomous Region; traveling there had moved the author to an epiphany on the subject of just "how dehumanising extreme hardship can be." Indeed, the experience of hunger is given exhaustive treatment. You get the sense of a people all but reduced to crawling on their knees because they lack the strength to walk. In one story, a young man sets out from the modernity of school to visit his nomadic family and dies along the way. He returns nonetheless, but now it is only half of him: "When he left Saga last month and boarded the bus to Mayoumu, he was so torn between the town and the grasslands that he felt as though his body were being ripped in two." These are tales where the supernatural, the strange, is made natural. Ma writes a literature of return in which symbols of a nation left to hover between the past and the unsettled present become palpable.

Beijing Coma
By Ma Jian.
Translated by Flora Drew.
Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 586 pp. $27.

The book's title refers to a manifestation of madness, specifically that of a girl whose mother was her grandmother, ill-used by men to the point of insanity. She would stick out her tongue in an apt greeting to a world that would permit such things. It also echoes the manner in which medicine—in this case, medicine all too strong—is administered. Thus, on its publication the book was banned as "a vulgar, obscene book that defames the image of our Tibetan compatriots." In other words, it peered behind the placards of official doublespeak to lay bare some rough realities.

In *The Noodle Maker*, published in Hong Kong in 1991 and in this country in 2005, Ma attacked the oppressions of the Communist regime through the rear-guard action of humor, slicing with a sharp knife into the depraved inanity of Big Brother. A frustrated writer and a professional blood donor meet to discuss matters, and the writer's would-be creations take form and spawn their own fictions. Ma has a point to make about a world where the usual medicines provide no cure: "she consulted the works of Heidegger, hoping to use his philosophy to untangle the mess in her mind, but after wading through a couple of times she discovered that Heidegger was even more confused than she was." This is why the author places himself, as the writer who has created the character of a writer who creates the character of a magazine editor who is himself a failed writer, in a hall of mirrors where one does not really know which writer is which. At least we're off the hook there, since, as he says of yet another scribbling character, "She didn't realise that writing is a meaningless act of vanity."

The baroque absurdities of this novel seem an entirely appropriate response to the absurdities of real life, in which party functionaries speak in adages behind which the human in them can successfully hide: "'Seek truth from the facts,' as our Premier says." But this is a country where the facts are squashed as flat as bugs. The character of a street writer, who is paid by the illiterate to write their letters for them, observes that the "absurd is more real than life itself," and thus a talking three-legged dog professes his optimism "about China's implementation of the Open Door Policy."

Here Ma, who is often compared to Gogol (but who also shares a few licks with Hans Christian Andersen and Maxim Gorky), seems to say that to laugh or cry are the only possibilities when faced with the monumental hypocrisies of Communist dictatorship: "Do you know how many counter-revolutionaries they've had to execute in order to achieve the stable society we enjoy today?" one of the characters in *Beijing Coma* asks, to our snicker. But in most

Melissa Holbrook Pierson is the author of three books, the most recent of which is The Place You Love Is Gone.

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of this new work, in contrast to the previous one, his answer is: cry. Long, loudly and eloquently. For the murder of hope, in those who embodied it for one brief moment of 1989 in Tiananmen Square, and for every kind of loss there is. This is a hell of a powerful book.

Through the recollections of Dai Wei, a protester who was shot in the head one fateful day in June and has lain comatose for ten years, the novel tells the story of a group of Peking University students—of fine arts and biology, of agriculture and education—who end up in the square. There, hundreds, perhaps thousands, of prodemocracy protesters were gunned down in the capital city's great meeting place, "the symbolic heart of the Communist state." This was the culmination of an occupation by the sons and daughters of those who lived through, or just as likely died in, the Cultural Revolution but had heard only whispers of its incomprehensible deprivations and brutalities; now they were to learn firsthand what some Chinese were willing to do to other Chinese. The seminal image of this fight for the Chinese people's basic yet thoroughly denied "right to choose their own path in life" was the photograph of a lone man who had the guts, or whatever it was, to singlehandedly stop a line of PLA tanks, and to likewise arrest the gaze of the world. In Ma's stirring account, there were tens of thousands of these lone men and women gathered together, willing to sacrifice themselves, through self-starvation or even self-immolation, for the greater good. They had had that much of enough.

Thanks in part to the ubiquitous reach of that image, we know exactly where this compendious story is going to end. Yet still there is considerable suspense. We are there, seeing through Dai Wei's eyes; we hear the amplified speeches ring out into the massive space of the square, see the medical emergencies, feel the energy of the mass that has come together in hope of changing something big, though few are sure what exactly it is. And it's from such uncertainty that Ma gathers the ironic fuel that propels this suspense: the students' naïveté does not permit them to see where this is going, incredibly enough. As we stand with them, we take on the classic role of viewers in a darkened theater watching the hero descend into the basement of no return. Even more compelling, the narrative is driven by questions about Dai Wei and the nature of his memory; after all, he is a young man whose favorite book is a guide to the supernatural creatures of ancient China, *The Book of Mountains and Seas*. His paralysis gives him the not-so-Wordsworthian tranquillity in which to recollect his memories of the student uprising, as well as his poignant longings for the girlfriends of yesteryear. Thus his thoughts are allowed free visitation to the counterfactuals of the past and future, while his body remains imprisoned in a present of no possibilities. In this he is a metaphor for the thinker in China today.

Beijing Coma is no simple document of an astonishing event in human history. Subtle and didactic at once, it manages to join these opposing qualities without a visible seam. Characters declaim on recent Chinese history, then comment on why there is need to do so, in lessons that manage to directly educate the reader and illuminate the fictional character. Here is some sort of literary magic. That we know the outcome is actually something we forget as we read, another neat trick perpetrated by an author who is both crafty and passionate: once we come to know these individuals, down to the smell of their shoes and the shape of their toes, the final stupendously crashing scene of pandemonium (as it echoes later in the solitude of poor Dai Wei's thoughts) is as shocking as it could possibly be, short of our having been there.

Ma Jian, as always, has bigger points to make (not to mention art with great emotional range). He does so by way of what looks like a bit of fun. Take the factions that grow like fungus in the damp medium of the encampment, the factions that he intimates are a congenital problem for the Chinese people: in one two-page span he enumerates the Dare-to-Die Squad, Hunger Strike Headquarters, the Beijing Students' Federation, the Provincial Students' Federation, the Workers' Federation and a troop called the Wolves of the North-West. In a case of "like father, like son," the students cannot get their march to the square under way until they have engaged in competitive slogan-crafting and painted the results onto banners, an endeavor that provokes ridiculous infighting. These young people are as prone to palace coups and militaristic overthrows as the oppressors they end up pelting with rocks and words. Ma has Dai Wei observe, "The vastness of the Square seemed to have inflated everyone's egos"; of another compatriot, Dai complains, "With his constant strategising, Yang Tao was living up to his reputation as a modern-day General Zhu Geliang."

The author, posing as satiric playwright, pens scenes of madcap irony to deliver his point that history, if unattended to, is destiny:

Pu Wenhua stumbled towards Bai Ling and tried to yank the megaphone from her. Too weak to fight back, Bai Ling sunk her teeth into his hand. Pu Wenhua was very frail too, so when Mou Sen gave him a

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light push, he fell flat on the ground. Mou Sen then slipped and tumbled on top of him, then Old Fu pounced on top of them both, and the three of them wrestled on the ground in a tangled heap.

Ma is clearly frustrated by the ignorance of these young people, who he thinks should know more, if not better: "Was Hu Yaobang the President of China, or General Secretary of the Communist Party?" one character asks. Considering that the death of Hu, the reform-minded General Secretary of the party, triggered the entire catastrophe, this is no rhetorical question.

Ma was both a witness and participant during the protests, which helps explain the panoramic force of his narrative. In a statement that accompanies the book's publicity materials, Ma describes his extraliterary motivations for writing what amounts to an anatomy of human courage, as well as a cry of disbelief. He spent six weeks camping out with the students in the square, at once thrilled by the sense that history was being made and dispirited by the knowledge that "in China political protests always end in a bloodbath." He explains, too, the circumstances of his arrival at the device of the comatose narrator, a man who is helpless to do anything except remember, by which he would deliver his powerful message about the cost of a change that ends up not changing much. The fictional Dai Wei is inspired by his brother, also at this time in a coma after an accident.

Therein hides one key to the novel's secret strength, the quiet undercurrent of simple human emotion that flows beneath the mighty river of social history it also represents. Dai Wei lies alone with his thoughts, with his past, and fear and sadness color it all. He remembers saying goodbye to a lover: "I felt as though I'd just dropped a porcelain vase." I can think of no more exquisite way to describe an indescribable loss.

Where *Stick Out Your Tongue* is calligraphy, and *The Noodle Maker* a wink-wink version of some ironic pop poster, *Beijing Coma* is *The Raft of the Medusa*. It is a grand and sweeping and knock-'em-over epic. Dai Wei comes across as real and specific, and so are his friends in the square, who take on the roles of general, speaker, patriot, fighter and lover. They are hypocrites who are also heroes. As for Dai Wei's mother, who doubles as his nurse, she provides some comic relief as well as the sense that life in China can be so desperate you would wish your own son dead; but barring that, you will sell his urine to those who would drink it as a health tonic and his kidney to anyone who will pay for it. As Dai Wei lies in his sickbed, he remembers. And that is what Ma Jian is really writing about: the act of remembering as the sole chance of hope for China.

> The world I used to live in has been transformed, like flour that has been baked into bread. I have to chew on it very slowly before I can recapture any sense of what it once was.

Dai Wei thus remembers back further, as Ma says the Chinese people must: he reads the journal of his father, who was carted away to a camp for the crime of thinking the wrong thoughts. The son is moved to ask the question that is at the center of Ma Jian's deep endeavor:

> What I wanted to ask was: "Who exactly did the Communists liberate? After the so-called Liberation in 1949, the Party drove one of my grandfathers to commit suicide, forced my uncle to murder the other, and locked my father up in labour camps for twenty years. They claimed they liberated the peasants. But the only peasants I've ever seen have been so destitute they don't know where their next meal is coming from."

The howl starts here.

In the wonderful translation by Flora Drew (the author's wife and translator of his other works), the memories of a tremendous moment in the history of this vast, ungraspable place become grounded in a narrative that encompasses almost all that writing can offer. There is poetry: Dai Wei's body is a map he follows to reach his past ("The soles of your feet exchange longing glances. The large mole on the small of your back yearns to speak"). The catalog of smells that runs through—sweaty tennis shoes, rotting cabbage, leaves, dank earth, garlic, dirty rags, "stale leftovers and oily pans"—is used like basting thread to tack the story down to knowable reality. There is the close observation of human nature and close scrutiny of the will to power. There is mordant wit, which is perhaps the only kind that ought to arise in the midst of tragedy: "Do you want me to give you the truth, or the lies that you've asked for before?" Dai Wei's mother asks the police. There is the recounting of horrors that make you gasp (in the "re-education-through-labour" camps, depravity stops at nothing, not even the eating of remnants from excrement, or one's fellow humans). There is, at last, the song of memory. Lest it become a dirge, Ma Jian says, the Chinese people must struggle to retain what they have lived through. Freedom to remember (for, today, the Tiananmen of only twenty years ago is in China officially forgotten) is the first freedom to guard.

Even if they do, the author hints darkly in the voice of one of his characters, "We've now entered the era of chaos that precedes the end of the world." It is all too easy to believe it. In any event, we will at least have had a fine bedtime story before the final sleep.

My 8-year-old son asked the other day if, when one is cut, one's blood evaporates. (He had been learning about the water cycle.) When I said yes, I suppose so, he replied, "Then there would be red rain." And it occurred to me that only in China was there a possibility, in both senses, of a true red rain. Enough blood has been spilled by the Communist regime that it could actually have fallen to earth as precipitation. Among the flowers it would have watered is the great work of Ma Jian. ■

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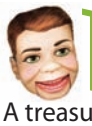

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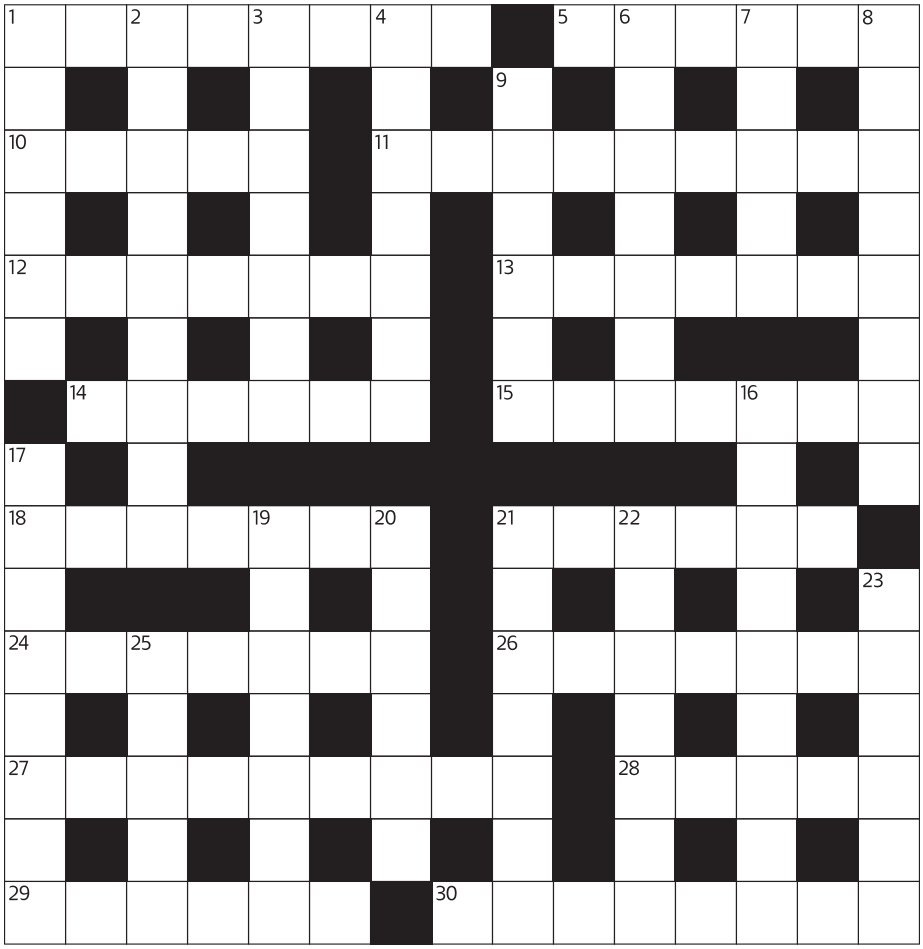

ACROSS

1 What the monks might be doing with Charles the detective less formally, with a ringing sound. (8)

5 Jump one season, and you might find water here…(6)

10 …said to appear before fall, like a bunch of the roaring type. (5)

11 King Fiddlehead is likely to be found in the marshland. (5,4)

12 Some folks have such a room on the row, as one might do with a certain chair. (7)

13 Supposedly it takes more than one to make a 5 across, as one does with drink. (7)

14 A time of rest supposedly, and in German you have to talk about something around it. (6)

15 One puts it on in time of emergency, perhaps—but there's a bit of an animal in what should hold the sheet. (3,4)

18 One isn't safe with such. (3-4)

21 When some people are not sure they say this to me. (One could describe it as fallen arches.) (6)

24 In Paris, the position of a French astronomer. (7)

26 Without much change, you could make it reserve a way to go back in your car. (7)

27 Some say it's a blissful state, with a variety of orange and the letters that often come to the company. (9)

28 What the gunman may tell you to do as you get as far. (5)

29 Suddenly inhaled what the driver steps on at times, with little Albert. (6)

30 Describing an inseparable element at this place with part of the Bible. (8)

DOWN

1 Garnishes playful jumps? (6)

2 A drink with the king and queen, leading to quite a battle! (9)

3 See 8

4 Run up to the southeast and bury the end of it where you might find little ones. (7)

6 Well, it's not in the printed material—but that's what the Vandals did. (7)

7 What I sometimes do with a deck of cards is perfect! (5)

8 and **3** Just blown away with what is more or less of a classic! (4,4,3,4)

9 Slangy way to swindle, and just put two and two together—it's on the house, possibly. (6)

16 Flay verbally, or exact, i.e.—if you beat it enough! (9)

17 The kind of bee that kids hope they won't get stung with. (It's enchanting, to some!) (8)

19 Where the kids might build a house, if really perplexed. (2,1,4)

20 On a par with believing, some say, when just looking. (6)

21 An advanced physician seems to bear the motto "rush suddenly forward." (7)

22 The Burma Shave poetry—or just the opposite? (7)

23 Something of a "dog" in the park, but you might get burned if it's so! (3,3)

25 Kicks in the field, or needing poles in the stream. (5)

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T	■	G	■	R	■	L	■	I	■	H	■	I	■	R
A	I	R	L	I	N	E	■	C	A	R	A	V	A	N
I	■	A	■	B	■	R	■	I	■	O	■	E	■	E
N	E	M	E	S	I	S	■	L	A	B	O	R	E	D

The Nation (ISSN 0027-8378) is published weekly (except for the second week in January, and biweekly the third week of July through the second week of September) by The Nation Company, L.P. © 2008 in the U.S.A. by The Nation Company, L.P., 33 Irving Place, New York, NY 10003. (212) 209-5400. Washington Bureau: Suite 308, 110 Maryland Avenue N.E., Washington, DC 20002. (202) 546-2239. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Subscription orders, changes of address and all subscription inquiries: The Nation, PO Box 55149, Boulder, CO 80322-5149, or call 1-800-333-8536. Publications Mail Agreement No: 40041477. Return undeliverable Canadian addresses to Bleuchip International, PO Box 25542, London, ON N6C 6B2. Canada Post: Publications Mail Agreement No.: 40612608. When ordering a subscription, please allow 4-6 weeks for receipt of your first issue and for all subscription transactions. Basic annual subscription price: $52 for 47 issues. Back issues $6 prepaid ($8 foreign) from: The Nation, 33 Irving Place, New York, NY 10003. The Nation is available on microfilm from: University Microfilms, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. Member, Audit Bureau of Circulations. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to The Nation, PO Box 55149, Boulder, CO 80322-5149. Printed in U.S.A. on recycled paper.

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Global warming.
50 million Americans uninsured.
Massive budget deficits.
Failing public schools.
A tarnished national image.

These are *not* policy failures.

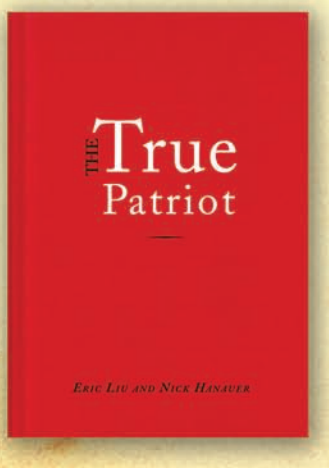
ACTUALLY, these crises are the inevitable result of the policies we've chosen. Today's polices *were designed* to treat our dependence on oil as a given, our basic health as a luxury, an adequate education as a privilege, and our children's wealth as our own.

No, our policies are working *exactly* as designed. The problem is, they all spring from a framework of principles and morals that is broken and bankrupt. American politics today is dominated by a morality of short-term over long-term, every man for himself, might makes right, the lowest get the least, and actions without consequences.

If patriotism means "country before self," today's moral framework certainly is *not* patriotic. We can do better—and in these challenging times, we must.

Stewardship. Shared sacrifice. Mutual obligation. Responsibility for the common good. Equality of opportunity.

These were the truly patriotic moral values that animated America's founding generation, and they are the principles we must return to if America is to sustain its greatness. We've written a little book that challenges each of us to answer the question: *What is true patriotism?* It's not a question of policy. It's a question of morality.



A pamphlet by
Eric Liu & Nick Hanauer
Available at
bookstores everywhere

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